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HESTER'S SACRIFICE

VOL. III.

HESTER'S SACRIFICE

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"ST. OLAVE'S," "JANITA'S CROSS,"

&c., &c.

"Life counts not hours by joys or pangs,
But just by duties done."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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CHAPTER I.

JANE FAWCET lingered behind the shadow of the lilac-trees until Thomas Bilson, little thinking what mischief he had done, was clinking his pails, as heretofore, down Milcote Lane. She peered up to the window of May's room; she could see shapes passing and repassing quickly upon the closed blinds. May was awake, then. The deed was done. Death must be very near now. Yet who could say that she had brought it near?

By-and-by Mr. Tredegar came out, and hurried down the Angusbury road. Most

likely he was going for Dr. Mackay. Dr. Mackay had left word that he was to be sent for if anything happened. But it was far to Angusbury, and Death travels faster than those who try to stay him. And the good old doctor did not know that death had found such a willing helper in the quiet, pale-faced woman who was wont to steal so silently about the old house at Milcote.

Then Jane Fawcet went back to the kitchen. It was empty. Hushed, too, but for the noisy chirping of the crickets, and that occasional, slow, ticking sound, which seemed to tell of something terrible at hand.

"Eh! Jane, honey," said Margaret, when she came in, a few minutes after, for hot water. "Tom Bilson hasn't done a worse

night's work nor this in all his born days, I'll warrant. And so sweetly as the dear bairn was sleeping, too, and all on us doing our best to keep the house still, so that she might get a chance, if it was the Lord's will, to come round again."

"Then has Miss May woke?" asked Jane, turning her face into the gloom that Margaret might not see its guilty paleness.

"Ay, honey, that she has, poor darling! Master's off to Angusbury for the doctor, 'cause he said partic'lar as he was to be sent for if aught happened that she was woke sudden. The master would ha' gived his right hand—ay, that he would—sooner than that bell should ha' rung when it did, and brought death back into the house, as one may say, after we was all led out in thanksgiving for the merciful deliverance as

had been wrought out for us. And poor Tom'll be in a taking too, he will, when he hears tell what he's done; for he's that harmless, is Tom Bilson, as he wouldn't set foot upon a beetle needless, let alone a death-stroke like this, though, poor lad, it was none of his wilful doing. Eh! Jane, honey, but what a pity you didn't happen to see him come up, and then you could have slipped out and took the milk without ever a ring at all. I wonder you didn't hear his step, for he's none light o' foot, isn't Tom Bilson."

"It's no use wishing things different, Margaret, when they're done," answered Jane, quietly. "I never hear anything when that cough of mine comes on; and as for seeing, I can't see in the dark no more than you can yourself."

"No, honey, I wasn't laying no manner of blame upon you. It's a providence, it is, as we can't see the meaning of. I nobbut thought, if you *had* happened to catch sight on him, what a blessing it would have been."

And then Margaret went away with the hot water, leaving Jane Fawcet sitting there by the fire, which had burned very low, only giving light enough to make the shadows flicker ghost-like in the dim recesses of the old kitchen. And the tall, oak-framed clock which stood by the window seemed like the spectre of some cowled monk, whose pale face looked down upon her in mute reproach for the evil she had wrought.

Jane shifted her seat uneasily, and began to tap with her feet upon the floor, that she might not hear the slow measured stroke of the

pendulum, whose every beat seemed like a voice to tell her guilty secret. Yet why need she be afraid? It was no doing of hers, so she said to herself over and over again, sitting there in the gloom and shadow of the old kitchen; it was no doing of hers that things were as they were. Had she been thousands and thousands of miles away, that night's work had been done just the same. May would have dropped asleep, and Tom Bilson's noisy ring would have woke her, and the waking would have been to death. What, then, had she to do with it, and why need any creeping terror blanch her face, and why need she start when the wind came shivering through the sycamores at the gate, and why need she shrink into the farthest shadow, pretending not to observe him, when Dr. Mackay, who had

come in by the back way, passed through the kitchen on his way upstairs? How could she see in the dark any more than other people? Ah! it was the gloom of a guilty soul that had blinded Jane Fawcet, and from that gloom she would come forth never more.

But May lived. That waking was not to death. Not in vain the sister love which had watched over her so faithfully, nor the words of prayer which, in many a solitary hour, Margaret had breathed for her. God gave the angel of life charge concerning her, and that other one, whose shadow had darkened Milcote so long, was bidden to fold his wings over some other home.

But he went unwillingly, coming back again and again to linger by the poor wasted form which had so nearly been his

own. Through many hours of patient watching, they scarce could tell whether life or death had laid upon May's face the deep calm which it wore. At last she slept again, and that sleep was long and unbroken. Waking from it, the dull stupor of unconsciousness had passed away. Hester bent over her, and with a joy which she had no words for, read once more the answering look of love in those dear eyes from which the light of the living soul seemed to have passed away for ever.

It was one peaceful September afternoon, a few days after Jane Fawcet's solitary vigil in Milcote garden, that May opened her eyes on the old familiar objects, which her mind was strong enough now to link with the old familiar memories of her former life. She heard the blackbirds singing in the

sycamore trees—singing for joy at the autumn sunshine, which was even now pencilling the outline of the jasmine branches upon her closed blinds. And now and then she saw the shadow of a leaf fluttering downward, a leaf that had fallen from the great elm tree at that corner of the house. Was it then the time for falling leaves?

May tried to remember, but could not. It seemed so long since she had counted by days or weeks. And then her eye wandered to the books that Hester used to read to her when first she began to be ill, and to the familiar pictures upon the walls, and to the little Parian vase, with some heads of tall trembling grass in it, which just swayed gently to and fro with the breeze from the open window. May had seen tall brown trembling grass like that before, some-

where; growing in great beds amongst fern and hazel, and she tried to remember where she had seen it; but again she failed. All but the little new life to which she had just awakened, seemed so dim and uncertain.

And there was the dressing-table with its muslin drapery, the table where she was sitting, twining some roses in her hair, when Hester came to her and asked if she would not go downstairs to speak to Mr. Brooke. Mr. Brooke. Basil Brooke. Who was he? The name had a pleasant sound, as though she had often listened to it before. And then, like the wandering uncertain notes of very distant music, came back the memory of the sweet life from which long weeks of illness had parted her. Very wandering and uncertain at first, but

as she listened to it, growing clearer and clearer, until she could at last hear the tune, the dear familiar music of a life that seemed years and years away. Ah! now she could remember the day at the Monk's Crag, the ramble on the little island. That was where she had seen the grass, then, and they were to gather the grass for Miss Lapiter. They. Who? Basil Brooke and herself. Basil Brooke, who used to be so kind to her. How had she known him; where? May tried to think, and as she tried, there came back to her those long pleasant afternoons at the School of Art, and those evenings, not many, but so bright, when Mr. Brooke used to come to see her papa, or if her papa was engaged, he would talk to herself and Hester, which was so much pleasanter. Or he would get her to

play and sing to him. How strange to think that she had ever been strong enough to play and sing, when now she could scarcely speak above a feeble fluttering whisper, and her poor little thin fingers had not even strength to clasp those of sister Hettie.

Was that a dream life, then, and this, so weak and suffering, the real one? Or was this the dream from which after awhile she should awake? May could not tell. All was so strange and bewildering. And whilst she was trying to make it clear, her head grew dizzy. Everything began to look dim and indistinct. Her memory was like the blending pictures of a dissolving view, one quivering upon the departing outlines of another; both alike misty and unreal. So she sunk away to sleep again, hoping

that somehow, though how she could not tell, things would set themselves straight.

Waking, Sister Hettie bent over her. Her face was very pale and worn, but in the faint light May could not distinguish that. She reached out her hands to find them clasped so warmly and lovingly by others that were scarcely less worn.

"Sister Hettie."

"Little May."

"I have come back again. I seem to have been a long time away."

"You have, darling. But you will stay with us now."

And then May felt those kind arms about her, and Hester's kisses on her lips; kisses which she had felt there so often, as if in dreams, when she had no power to give them back again.

"What has been the matter with me, Sister Hettie?"

"You have had a fever, May. You have been ill a long, long time."

"Yes; I suppose so. It seems years and years since we went to the Monk's Crag, and Mr. Brooke took me to that beautiful island."

And then there was a little pause, whilst a faint tinge of colour crept into May's cheek.

"Sister Hettie."

"Yes, darling."

"When people are ill, they sometimes say things they don't mean to say."

"Sometimes."

"Have I said anything that I wouldn't have said if I had been well?"

"Never mind, May, darling. We will talk about it another time."

"No; but tell me now. I shall be better if you will tell me just now."

"May, you are quite safe."

Hester said no more, but took the two poor little thin hands in her own, and looked with a long, loving look into the face which was searching hers so earnestly. And in that long, loving look, May read that all her life, even down to its deepest, dearest secret, was indeed safe in Sister Hettie's keeping.

CHAPTER II.

AFTER that evening, May improved quickly. Sunshine was coming back to Milcote; soon those old rooms would ring with the merry laugh that had been so long silent, and, like some remembered music which they thought hushed for ever, May's voice should carol through the house once more.

Her illness had done Mr. Tredegar good. Perhaps he did not know before how dear his children were to him. Perhaps he had never sat down and tried to realise what life would be without them. But whether he appreciated his blessings more keenly or

not, he began to manifest his affection for them more tangibly. Perhaps Miss Lapiter was right when, in her funny way, she remarked to Hester, a few days after May had got a turn, and was pronounced out of danger,

"You know, my dear, I sometimes think that families are like fires, they want a good poke now and then, or they burn hollow and go out entirely. Many a fire has gone dead out, that would have burned away cheerily enough if only someone had happened to come in and just stirred it together. And if you won't be offended with me for saying it, my dear, it had really occurred to me that you worthy Milcote people were beginning to want a poke; you were dropping away from each other, burning hollow, if I may so express it, and

perhaps family affection would have almost gone out, if May's illness had not been sent by way of a poker to push you all nearer together, and get up a right cheery blaze. And so you see, it's all for the best, as everything is that happens in this world, if only people could be sensible enough to view it in that light."

But Miss Lapiter did not expend all her good-will in words. As soon as May was able to enjoy them, there came presents of fruit and flowers, from Rose Cottage; rich purple clusters of grapes, which the kind little lady had packed in the freshest of green leaves; peaches soft and downy as May's own cheek; bunches of crimson and white geranium, such as for size and beauty, grew nowhere but in Miss Lapiter's green-house; and such bouquets of fern and wild flowers as were not

to be found even there, no, nor anywhere but in the warm sheltered recesses of a certain little island in the midst of a certain placid lake, three miles away from Angusbury. And as there was only one person in all the town who could arrange ferns in that way, and cluster into such graceful forms what the generality of people were wont to stigmatise as good-for-nothing weeds, it was only natural to suppose that Mr. Brooke had gone and gathered them there, on those days when there was no morning class at the School of Art.

And that May knew whence they came, was evident enough from the care with which she treasured them, and the kisses which, when no one was there to see, she used to press on their delicate leaves. Perhaps those fern and wild flower bouquets were as

much of a tonic to little May as the quinine and bark and strengthening mixtures which Dr. Mackay administered so plentifully by way of repairing the waste of the fever.

But other offerings than these found their way to Milcote. Morning after morning, Nils Brayton, who was a first-rate sportsman, used to come with game which he had shot on the Angusbury moors. And Jane Fawcet, who knew his step as well as May knew Basil Brooke's, was always ready to receive it, together with the kind inquiries which Mr. Brayton made respecting May and her sister. But Jane knew better than to call Hester down to reply to those inquiries in person, or even to tell her that it was Nils Brayton himself who made them. So after depositing the gift in a safe place, she would come back, and with the gravest, quietest face, deliver

such a message as her own knowledge of the invalid's condition told her would be suitable.

"Miss Tredegar is much obliged, and Miss May is improving steadily."

That was the messnge, morning after morning, and as often as Nils Brayton received it he turned away disappointed. If May was improving steadily, Hester might have left her room for a few minutes to give that pleasant information herself, instead of always sending it by a messenger. It would not have been very much trouble. He would have done more, far more than that, for her. Was it that she did not care, that she did not wish to see him?

Perhaps some such thought as this was written in Nils Brayton's face, and Jane Fawcet read it there, as morning after morn-

ing he received the same message and went his way, too proud to ask that which he so greatly longed for, a single word from Hester herself. But whatever she saw, Jane made no sign; demurely as ever she would go back to her work in the kitchen, ready to deliver the same reply, if need be, another morning.

Jane Fawcet's plans had failed in one direction. May's recovery, as unwelcome as it was unexpected, had brought things back to their old track. There would be a wedding at Milcote soon, but not the one she longed to see—not the one which would so sadly mar Nils Brayton's peace. Rather one which would make that peace more certain; for when Basil Brooke and May were married, and Hester was left alone, there would be little to oppose that strong,

overmastering will, which Ruth Bennet said, rightly enough, seldom failed to achieve its purpose. All she could do now was to keep Nils Brayton away from Milcote, to make it appear that Hester was indifferent to him; at any rate, to intercept, as far as possible, any communication between them.

This last thing she did so successfully, that through all the long weeks of May's recovery, Nils Brayton only saw Hester once. That was by accident, when he came earlier than usual one morning, and found her walking in the garden. She rarely went beyond the garden now, for May seemed to weary if some one was not always by, to amuse her and pass the hours away. He had scarcely time to notice how spiritless she looked—how her gentle sprightliness

had all faded away, when Jane Fawcet came hurriedly up.

"Please, Miss Tredegar, Miss May's bell has rung. I think she will be wanting you."

Jane knew a message like that would have brought May's sister from the ends of the earth to attend to it. And then, with sidelong glance, she watched Nils Brayton —watched the look of disappointment which crept over his face, as slowly, and with lingering footsteps, he turned away. Yes, even now she could put a few drops of bitterness into his cup; patience for a little while, and that cup should overflow.

Had Jane Fawcet known the issues of that chance meeting, she would even have laboured more diligently to prevent it. For, as Nils Brayton, sitting alone in his office

through the long dreary autumn days, thought of Hester as he had seen her then, the slight chill of pride which had crept into his heart towards her, melted away. With a tender sort of reverence he bore in his memory the face she had lifted to him, a face from which so much of hope and brightness had been taken since last he looked into it. These long weeks of watching had paled her cheek and stolen the lightness from her step. She, too, had suffered, and that suffering had left its mark in the weary patience for which she had exchanged the cheerfulness of her early youth.

And thinking of her thus, so changed, there dawned upon his love that diviner element of unselfishness which was needed to make it pure and perfect. Hitherto he had

loved Hester for what she could be to him. She was as the little wayside rill, beside whose cool waters he, so hot and spent with the great toil of life, might sit down and rest. She was as the gentle dew, which falling noiselessly into his heart, would cause to spring there the sweet blossoms of hope and happiness. For life hitherto had brought him scant measure of its precious gifts. The past held little that he could look upon with other than regret; the future, except so far as the thought of Hester brightened it, was dreary and unpromising, just one dull round of care and duty, day by day, year by year, until the end came. Her love would make that life rich and fruitful, and so he longed for it, as those who have toiled hard long for rest.

Now he began to think of what he could

be to her. She, too, had cares to be quieted —cares upon which love might lay its gentle hand and hush them to rest. That face, once so still and unpassionate, was telling its own story, revealing anxiety which Hester was too unselfish to put into words and so win relief. Hitherto he had been content to take from her; now there was revealed to him the sweeter joy of giving. He felt that to her—he, so strong, could give shelter; to her, feeble now and care-worn, he could be as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. And dear as she had been before, that thought made her dearer still.

Meanwhile, as Jane Fawcet said, May was "steadily improving."

At first she was able to be placed in the great cushioned chair by the window

for an hour or two every day. Then, leaning on Hester's arm, she paced very slowly up and down the room. At last—and that was a red-letter day for the Milcote people—she travelled all the way downstairs into the parlour, which Hester had decorated with richly-tinted autumn leaves and flowers, until it could scarcely be known for the same sombre, faded-looking spot which May remembered of old.

None gave her a warmer welcome than Miss Lapiter, who came in that same afternoon with a free-will offering of grapes, rich purple grapes, with the bloom untouched upon them, nestling amongst the freshest, greenest leaves that could be gathered from Rose Cottage garden.

"And a mercy, indeed, that I ever got them here at all," said the dear little wo-

man, as she put them down and gave May a hearty squeeze, so hearty that the child who, in spite of Dr. Mackay's strengthening mixtures, was still weak enough, almost panted after it—"quite a mercy, for the Angusbury boys were at me all the way, like wasps round a ripe plum, though, however they can contrive to see through such a quantity of leaves as I wrapped round these grapes, in order that they might not be suspected, passes my comprehension altogether. But as I always say of the Angusbury boys, it's instinct; that's just what it is, instinct, and nothing else."

"And now, my dear child," continued Miss Lapiter, "little May-blossom, as Mr. Brooke always calls you, and quite correct, too, for I'm sure you're as dainty as hawthorn flowers with just the faintest little pink

touch in the middle of the leaves,—I've come to give you my best congratulations on reaching the ground-floor again, which is a great mercy, because, Miss May, though of course your dear sister had too much discretion to tell you so on account of your nervous system, we really did think that if you were ever brought downstairs again, it would be into the basement story, which, as you know well enough, is underground. An uncomfortable place as I always think for young people in the bud of life, however beautiful a marble stone we raise in affectionate remembrance."

"Yes," answered May, with a fond look at her sister; "I believe the fever did try very hard to kill me, but sister Hettie wouldn't let me die. And I didn't mean to, either."

"My dear," and Miss Lapiter put out her two hands as far as they would reach, "do not express yourself in that manner. It is scarcely consistent with the proprieties of life, which I'm sure you'll begin to consider now that you have been brought back to it in such a wonderful manner, considering the seriousness of the attack, and autumn being a bad time for illness, too. You know my dear, life has its proprieties, and you are of an age now to appreciate them. I have quite looked forward to this fever as a beneficial arrangement for making a woman of you. An illness is so very maturing."

But May, lying amongst her cushions on the sofa, did not seem at all matured. Indeed, to look at her face now, into which, notwithstanding its delicate paleness, most of the old roguish merriment had come back, it seemed

very doubtful whether French governesses, or fevers, or any other beneficial arrangements whatever, would succeed in making a woman of her. May was like one of those little drawing-room fountains, whose tiny perfumed stream is being held down by some strong hand; the water is there still, bubbling away all the time, and as soon as the hand is removed, it will flash up again, sparkling and saucy as ever.

"Yes," continued Miss Lapiter. "An illness is very maturing, like a bell glass to early spring annuals, draws them up wonderfully, and brings them into flower before the usual time. But I shall tell Mr. Brooke that you are mending as well as could be expected. Mr. Brooke inquires after you like a brother. Indeed, Miss May, if he was your brother"—and here Miss Lapiter looked impressively

at Hester—"if Mr. Brooke was your brother, he could not have made more affectionate inquiries after you, and I tell him so."

To which diplomatic piece of intelligence, Miss May deigned no reply, save a very impatient toss of her golden curls. Those curls ought to have been cut off, Dr. Mackay said, only it was such a pity to spoil them. And next time Miss Lapiter asked her a question, she gave such a short, sharp little answer, that the worthy maiden lady was quite put about, but decided at last that it was the fever which had exerted an unfavourable influence on May's temper.

"Temper, my dear Miss May, just a little bit of temper, for I'm sure I didn't mean to wound you, not in the least. I rather thought you would like to know how very brotherly Mr. Brooke felt towards you, for I'm sure he is

the very kindest-hearted man that ever came into the house. But fever is certainly a very trying thing to the temper, especially when it's passing off in weakness, as it generally does. You ought to have a change of air, Miss May; my dear mother used to say there was nothing like change of air for scattering off the effects of a fever. Hastings, or Torquay, or something of that sort. Now, Mr. Tredegar," and Miss Lapiter turned to May's papa, "don't you think Hastings, or Torquay, or something of that sort, is just what the dear child wants?"

Mr. Tredegar looked at the frail little blossom that had so nearly been snatched away from him, the little blossom which even yet a rude untimely wind might blast, and he gave it as his opinion that Hastings, or Torquay, or something of that sort, would be the very thing for her.

"Yes," said Miss Lapiter, triumphantly; "I knew you would agree with me. There is nothing so essential as change of air after a fever. And now, Mr. Tredegar, I would suggest, if you will take my advice, that you and May should go away for three months; you know these next three months are very trying for an invalid; fogs and winds and all that sort of thing, and if you got the dear child nicely out of the way of them, in pleasant sheltered lodgings, with nothing to do but enjoy herself, she would come back just herself again, or even a great deal better. Now do think about it, Mr. Tredegar."

Mr. Tredegar promised he would think about it.

Miss Lapiter, innocent speculator, had her own private intentions about this visit to

Torquay, or Hastings, or something of that sort. And she knew a young lady who was delicate and wanted to go south for the winter, so that May would have company without taking her sister away from Angusbury, which was the very last thing which ought to be done under present circumstances. And as for Mr. Tredegar, he never wanted company, so all places were alike to him, and his not being acquainted with any one in Torquay wouldn't make a bit of difference. As for Hester, as soon as her papa and sister were disposed of, Miss Lapiter meant to ask her to Rose Cottage for an unlimited period, in order that Milcote might undergo a thorough fumigation. A fumigation, Miss Lapiter said, came as naturally after a fever as dessert after dinner, and would be a capital excuse for

getting the dear girl away. Then there would be nice long winter evenings with Mr. Brooke, warm, firelight evenings, when he would have nothing to do but to make himself agreeable, which he was always so willing to do. And then. And then. Miss Lapiter thought she could see as far through a wood as most people. A charming arrangement, that visit to Torquay for three months.

But May did not think it charming at all, quite the reverse. She had no intention of being banished to the southern coast with her grave papa and a delicate young lady. Three months away from Angusbury, with no Mr. Brooke to come and talk nonsense to her, or send her pretty flowers—no one to pet and caress her, or help to pass away those autumn evenings which

seemed so long unless he was there to cheer them. No; May did not approve of that charming arrangement, by any means, and she would let them see it, too.

So she turned her face away and set her lips together; and when Miss Lapiter got up to say good-bye, she pretended to be asleep, and would not even rouse up to shake hands with her; the tiresome old lady, who was always doling out little bits of moral reflection and making charming arrangements, and wanting her to freeze up into a well-bred, properly conducted young lady. But when May gave her papa his good-night kiss, she looked right into his face with a pretty assumption of decision.

"Papa, if you take me anywhere for three months, I shall just do nothing but cry all the time, because I don't want to go.

And I shan't get better anywhere so soon as in Angusbury, because it's a nice place, and I like it very much—a great deal better than those stupid old invalid shops that Miss Lapiter talks about."

And May emphasised this speech by a nod of her head, which said plainly enough,

"Now, papa, you understand, don't you? *I won't go.*"

Papa did understand, and they didn't go. And so, for the second time, Miss Lapiter's plans came to grief, and that well-disposed maiden lady began to think that if things always did happen for the best, as she liked to believe they did, it required a great amount of faith to accept the doctrine under certain circumstances.

CHAPTER III.

THANKS to a favourable season, a good constitution, and a naturally cheerful disposition—which last was doubtless a most valuable auxiliary to Dr. Mackay's strengthening mixtures—May's steady improvement progressed until it reached perfection.

Perhaps, having so resolutely opposed Torquay or Hastings, or anything of that sort, she felt herself in duty bound to afford a practical illustration of the health-restoring properties of the Angusbury atmosphere; but however that might be, the roses bloomed upon her cheeks again, the merry laughing

light flashed as mischievously as ever out of her blue eyes, and that wealth of golden hair which May had been so proud of since Basil Brooke told her it was the real poet's colour, swept away back from a face to which all the soft, round outlines of youth and health had returned.

And with returning health, came back all May's former light-hearted ways. She began to frisk about the house again like a little elf or sprite, here, and there, and everywhere. She never seemed to do anything but make paper flowers, and sing, and chirp to the canary, who enjoyed that sort of conversation very much, and coax kisses and caresses from everyone, Basil Brooke and Miss Lapiter included. As for setting down to a course of useful occupation, as the books suitable for young people recom-

mend, that was clearly out of the question. The very idea of May settling down to useful occupation, or serious reading, or district visitation, or the mending of her own clothes, or the management of household matters, was so utterly ludicrous and out of place, that she never gave it any lodgment in her mind. Life to her was just one great garden of Eden; whether there might be a wilderness beyond, or anything at all beyond, or whether the time might ever come when kisses and caresses, and the feeding of canaries, and the singing of songs, and the making of paper flowers would cease to be the supreme end of existence, Miss May Tredegar had not yet begun to consider.

Margaret used to shake her head sometimes as the little rosebud of a girl went

dancing about the house, filling it with smiles and sunshine and merriment. And at night, when she sat over her work in the kitchen, her zeal for May's spiritual welfare would overflow in words which so blended affection and anxiety, that Jane Fawcet, who listened to them, knew not which was strongest.

"I misdoubt yon dear young lady's affliction hasn't been sanctified to the saving of her precious soul, as the Almighty intended it to be. These here things is a leading o' Providence to set our feet into the path of duty, and bring us to a knowledge of the error of our ways. But Miss May don't seem to see no manner of error in her ways, and I don't much wonder neither, for they're pretty ways enough, prettiest ever I see; but it lies strong upon my

mind as they aren't the ways as leads to the Kingdom. I misdoubt the dear bairn hasn't been led to cry out in bitterness of soul by reason of her iniquity, and to repent in sackcloth and ashes for the years wherein she has wrought evil. She's a sweet jewel, bless her! one as ought to shine in the blessed Redeemer's crown, and it goes to my heart, it does, to think that the enemy of souls should prevail over her to draw her away with the workers of iniquity."

But when Margaret spoke such words as these, Jane was silent. To her that good woman's life, the faith that sustained, the hope that brightened, the love that hallowed it, were alike strange; things with which she could not intermeddle. What did Jane Fawcet know of any "zeal for souls," of any

"drawings out in prayer," of any "blessed sense of divine peace,"—Jane, whose one thought was revenge, whose one purpose was to blast the life which had blasted her own? With a short laugh, she would reply—

"I wasn't brought up in your sort of way, Margaret, and these things you make so much of, don't belong to me. I can't see in the dark."

And then with a sigh, Margaret used to take her bible up to May's room, to read her "a portion." She had done this every evening since May began to get better, and when the chapter was read it was her custom to expound it, after a simple, practical fashion.

"Oh! that's you, old Margaret," the little reprobate would say, as the broad, honest face peered in through the closed curtains. "And you've come to read me one of those pretty

stories again. That's right, only please not to put anything of your own after it, for I don't want the mixture as before to-night. Now then——"

And having given this promising greeting to her spiritual instructor, May would fold her hands and drop her eyelids, and listen with becoming gravity to the appointed "portion."

"Very pretty, Margaret, very pretty indeed; and what a dear little boy Joseph was not to get into a passion when they put him in the pit. I would, I know, if it had been me, such a cruel, ill-natured trick. But how funny it would be, Margaret, if people were to talk in that sort of way now. I think our way is much nicer. It's rather a long chapter. I wish they had asked me to help them. I wouldn't have put half so many verses in.

No, no; I don't want you to commentate upon it. Good night, and you're a dear, kind old Margaret to take so much trouble."

"Good night, Miss May. But before you lay you down to rest, aren't you going to ax the Almighty that he would cause you to abide in safety beneath the shadow of his wing, and raise you up to give him thanks at the remembrance of his mercies?"

"What's the use, Margaret? Sister Hettie prays for me, and gets me everything I want. I don't like to trouble God so much. And nothing ever happens. There, good night again. I shall be asleep directly."

Sweet little heathen. Could she ever become perfect through suffering, as true souls must? Could she even conquer, knowing not what strife meant; or ask, being ignorant of toil, for any rest that heaven could give?

"Ah, well! she's in the Lord's hands, and he can do what he will with his own."

And with this, the only anodyne which love can take for all its sorrows, Margaret would go back to her work in the kitchen.

Miss Lapiter said it was Hester's careful nursing which made May get well so rapidly. One might have thought, she said, that dear Hester was a person of mature age, who had all her life been accustomed to deal with sick people. She had such pleasant, cheerful ways; she never used to talk about uncomfortable or disagreeable things—never worried May by bringing up little housekeeping cares, or letting her see the internal machinery of that domestic management which seemed to move so smoothly and pleasantly along, as if with sole and special reference to her own com-

fort. She would watch for the first passing shade of weariness on her sister's face, and chase it away with some bright thought—some unexpected amusement which she kept in store for such occasions. If the October sunshine lay in golden floods upon the grass, she would coax May out into the garden; or if the days were dull and dreary, she would beguile their slow march with new books from the Angusbury library, or pictures which Basil Brooke had sent, or some sort of light fancy work which seemed the very thing for invalid fingers. Certainly, there never was any one who could make getting well such a happy thing as Sister Hettie made it for little May.

But then, as Miss Lapiter also observed, it was such a thing to have a contented mind. A contented mind was a continual

feast. And dear Hester had such a contented mind—such a well-spring of quiet enjoyment within herself, as one might tell by looking at her, though she *had* got so pale and thin of late, on account of anxiety and watching. And, indeed, Miss Lapiter might well say that; for, except when she was alone, Hester never let any shadow of her own private cares cloud that face which May always looked to for a sympathising smile. She kept her sorrows for herself, her joys she shared with others. Only at night, when she was alone—when there was no more need for outward show of cheerfulness, she used to think of what life might have been, even for her, of the brief, bright dream from which May's feverish ramblings had recalled her. And she would open the costly prize which Basil

Brooke had given her in the presence of the "nobility, clergy, and gentry of Angusbury," and ponder over that little picture at the beginning—the brook, with flag leaves bending over it, and sheltering a tiny cluster of forget-me-not—forget-me-not which should always grow by the brook side, he said. What a fairy land of hope that picture had once opened to her; to what a sunny future had it been the guide! Now, that was all over. Another held the key of those golden gates. She should wander no more in the paradise from which they barred her. It was closed for evermore.

Miss Lapiter said, then, that Hester's careful nursing had done all the good. But Jane Fawcet, who had heard Miss Lapiter say so, could have told quite a different story. Jane Fawcet, gliding like a shadow

to and fro in that house, noting every movement, watching every face, hearing what no one else heard, seeing through those half-closed eyes what no one else saw—Jane Fawcet knew better than that. She knew well enough whose footsteps on the gravel-walk caused May to brighten up, and brought such a flush to her cheek, such a warm light to her eye. She knew why May always wore her favourite dress, and arranged her hair so carefully on those evenings when there was no class at the School of Art. The child always looked pretty enough, but then she was like a poet's dream for loveliness; and Basil Brooke thought so, too, else why did he linger so long in that sombre little Milcote parlour, which certainly was not to be compared with his cosy damask-curtained room at Rose Cottage

for lightness, and brightness, and elegance? No; May had quite other reasons for getting better than any Miss Lapiter had yet found out.

And Jane Fawcet knew why Hester's face was sad; why, instead of brightening up, as it ought to have brightened up, when May began to get well again, it still kept the tried, patient look which had brooded upon it in those past days of watching and anxiety. More than once she had stepped quietly into the parlour, where Hester, thinking herself alone, was leaning back in the low easy chair, with shut eyes and fingers that clasped each other tightly, painfully, as Jane sometimes clasped hers when she thought of *her* past. Happy people never sat in that way. Hester never used when first Jane Fawcet came to the

situation. Always then, if she happened to go into the room, Miss Tredegar was busily employed upon her drawing, or painting, or some pretty work; and there was a pleasant smile upon her face, the flower of pleasant thoughts within. Was this change, then, just the re-action from an overwrought mind, upon which suspense had pressed too heavily? Jane thought not. Scant hope for Nils Brayton in Hester's face now.

She had sent Nils Brayton away that morning, when he came with a message from his mother. Miss Tredegar was engaged, and would send an answer by the servant during the course of the day. Which answer Jane had taken herself to Lellandsbank, winning thereby an hour of Ruth Bennet's brisk conversational chatter. And an hour like that was worth a great

deal. It taught her many things about the Brayton family; it gave her "a clear sense of direction," as Margaret used to say of her spiritual experience; it shed light upon her plans, and helped her to see through them, almost to the end. Jane Fawcet intended that Miss Tredegar should often be engaged when such messages came from Lellandsbank.

Hester's face used to brighten up as much as May's when Mr. Brooke came; but it never brightened now; and though she always opened the hall-door for him when he went away, there were never any lingering hand-clasps or low-spoken words, such as she once used to steal round and crouch among the lilac bushes to hear between them. He always went away now in a brisk, straightforward manner, with a dis-

tinct good-night, which, for any inner meaning which it held, might have been uttered from the market-cross or the housetops. Just such a good-night as he would have said had Mr. Tredegar opened the door for him, or if she had opened it for herself, only that she, the poor Milcote servant girl, was not worth saying good-night to at all. She was just a machine there to do her duty, and take her wages, nothing more than that.

Waking up from such a reverie as this, Jane Fawcet would find Margaret's eyes fixed upon her with a curious, wondering expression. Then she used to rouse herself, put the mask on again, and stitch away with greater industry than ever.

CHAPTER IV.

NO more of those low-spoken dialogues at the front door, when Basil Brooke went away. Yes, there was one; and it happened on this wise.

Miss Lapiter had sent for Hester to spend the evening with her. The dear girl so seldom got out now, she was so devoted to that precious sister of hers. Really if the child had been still at death's door, Hester could not have sacrificed herself more entirely. It was very beautiful to see such complete sisterly devotion, but at the same time Miss Lapiter thought that sort of thing

might be carried too far. People had duties towards themselves, as well as towards their sisters, and there was no need now for Hester to risk her health by such constant confinement to the house, especially as, since May's illness, she had given up the drawing-class, and so deprived herself of an almost daily walk to Angusbury. A very unnecessary deprivation, for the child was well enough now to be left alone for a few hours without the least impropriety.

So Miss Lapiter sent for Hester to spend an evening at Rose Cottage, and with praiseworthy prudence that ingenious maiden lady fixed upon one when there was no work at the School of Art. It was to be a quiet opportunity, a very quiet little opportunity, similar to the one which Hester had enjoyed so much, three or four months

ago; in fact, just after Mr. Brooke came to Rose Cottage. Miss Lapiter hoped it would be as successful. True, the time was past for June twilight, nor would there be much satisfaction in sitting by the open window and feeling the breeze come in over the mignonette baskets; but when the real sort could not be had, fire twilight was a good substitute, just as productive of pleasant sentiment and confidential conversation. And so, when the shadows of night fell and the curtains were drawn, Miss Lapiter would wisely abstain from lighting the gas, so that Hester and Mr. Brooke might sit in that dreamy delicious idleness which had been so sweet four months ago. There was nothing like twilight for bringing people together, and making them understand each other. Indeed, it was almost as good

as a picnic, such a picnic as they were to have to the Monk's Crag the next bright autumn day, in search of striated rocks for the Millsmany professor of geology.

So the day was fixed, and the tea-cakes made, and the chintz covers—which Miss Lapiter always put on when she began with fires—removed from the easy-chairs, and fresh flowers put in the vases, and all due preparations completed for a second triumphant chat and muffin entertainment. But, alas! and again alas! For the third time Miss Lapiter's castle fell to the ground! That very afternoon, Mr. Brooke, who had expressed himself as so charmed at the prospect of spending a long quiet evening with Miss Tredegar, discovered, to his infinite disappointment, that he must deny himself that pleasure, on account of an un-

expected engagement, which would necessitate his presence in another direction. He was so very sorry, he should so have enjoyed a quiet evening with Miss Tredegar, but, &c., &c.

"So unfortunate, my dear Hester—so very unfortunate, and quite too late to send you word, or I would have changed the day," said poor Miss Lapiter, almost with tears in her eyes, as she placed Hester in the easy-chair, and proceeded, as heretofore, to root out a brown stocking from a work-basket under the sofa. "And so unaccountable, too, because I told him I was expecting you to spend the evening with me, and lately he has been so anxious to know when you were coming. You see, my dear, he has a pleasant recollection of your last little evening here; and no wonder,

for I'm sure you both of you came out beautifully, and I promised him I would send for you again as soon as ever it was consistent with propriety; only you see, poor May's illness upset everything so completely, that I was obliged to set all my little plans aside. But as soon as the dear child got downstairs again, he asked me when you were coming to spend a quiet evening at Rose Cottage, and I declare, ever since then, he has scarcely passed a day without mentioning the subject. You have made quite an impression, my dear, I assure you—quite an impression."

And Miss Lapiter looked into Hester's face for a smile or a blush. But she found neither. Dear Hester was a person who concealed her feelings so; Miss Lapiter thought it was almost a pity for people to

conceal their feelings so entirely. A proper amount of reserve was very charming in a young lady of Hester's age, but it might be carried to too great an extent, like sisterly devotion.

"A pressing engagement, my dear, he said, and I'm sure it must be a pressing engagement that would induce him to deny himself the pleasure of an evening with you. *I* fancy it has some connection with this new plan of his—this portrait painting plan. I daresay you have heard him mention that he is wishful to establish himself as a portrait-painter in Angusbury."

Hester had heard him talk about it, and she had heard him ask her papa if May would favour him with sittings. To which Mr. Tredegar, who seemed wonderfully wil-

ling to place the attractions of Milcote at Mr. Brooke's service, had replied that, as soon as May was quite strong again, he had no doubt she would be very happy to oblige him. But Hester did not think with Miss Lapiter that the portrait-painting scheme had called him away from Rose Cottage that evening.

"And in that case, you know, a connection is very important. To a young man who wishes to establish himself as an artist, a connection is everything. Perhaps, you know," and here Miss Lapiter glanced pleasantly at Hester—"perhaps, you know, he thinks of settling permanently, and the School of Art is not much to settle upon; besides being fluctuating, a percentage, I believe, upon the number of pupils. And so, my dear, we will not be too hard upon him,

as I have no doubt it was an unforeseen disappointment; and I really did feel quite sorry for him, poor man! He looked so very grieved when he told me he should be obliged to deny himself the pleasure of meeting you. I told him I would change the day with the greatest of pleasure, if only he would go down to Milcote to let you know, but he begged me not to do that; you see he is so considerate, and he knew that I had made all my little arrangements. I do admire it so in a gentleman—that nice sense of domestic convenience. There isn't one man in a hundred who would ever have given a thought to the tea-cakes being made, and the covers off the furniture. But that goes through everything with Mr. Brooke, such a charming man in a house.

So they had a quiet evening, much quieter than Miss Lapiter intended; the conversation consisting chiefly of remarks on the weather, household matters, cases of parochial distress, raising of choice ferns, district visiting, and some very pretty new bonnets which Miss Lapiter had seen in the head milliner's shop, and intended to copy for her own winter wear. No fine acts or foreign scenery this time, no twilight pauses, long sweet silences for thought and fancy to work in; nothing but just a little surface trickle of amiable chat on the most common-place of subjects. Neither did the evening close so triumphantly as it might have done, for Basil Brooke did not return in time to walk home with Hester, and so she had to perform the journey alone in a fly; a most uncomfortable thing, as Miss Lapiter said, and extravagant, too; for

when a vehicle was made to hold four people, it seemed such a wilful waste of money to put only one into it. And therefore whenever Miss Lapiter rode by herself in a fly, she made a point of looking out in all directions to see if she could pick anyone up on the road, and it was such a satisfaction to her if she could get the machine full before it reached its destination. But things would happen contrarily sometimes, notwithstanding the care that had been taken to make them fit pleasantly together, and in such cases there was nothing for it but to believe in a disposing providence, which was a very difficult thing to believe in sometimes, however much good sense people brought to the task.

With which wise remark Miss Lapiter kissed her dear young friend, and wishing her a pleasant ride home, went back into the

parlour to indulge her disappointment at leisure.

When Hester reached Milcote, Basil Brooke was just leaving it. That was the "pressing engagement," then, which he had been so unexpectedly called upon to fulfil. Jane Fawcet was opening the door for him, but seeing Miss Tredegar, she stepped back and left them together in the hall. He bade her a cheerful good night, and was going away; but when he got half way to the gate, he turned back, and taking her two hands in his, kissed her very lightly on the forehead; saying as he did so—

"It is for Sister Hettie."

Then he went away, and the sound of his footsteps was soon hushed upon the falling sycamore leaves.

It was a little sentence, but Hester under-

stood all its meaning. It told her she had found a new brother. Henceforth, to Basil Brooke, she was to be "Sister Hettie," never anything more than Sister Hettie.

CHAPTER V.

IT is generally with bright, joyous expectancy that a young artist stands before the canvas on which is to be shaped forth the picture, whose fair ideal has for months been slowly growing in his thoughts. He is haunted by no vexing dreams of failure. He knows that the practised eye, the skilful right hand, will faithfully reproduce the glowing image of his fancy. Even now, on that yet unstained canvas, he can see the complete picture. From the sunny foreground, away to the purple distance, all seems to stand out

brave and clear. Time and patience, only these, and he is sure of success.

So he labours steadily on for a few months, and then come weariness and doubt. The unfinished picture mocks the fair ideal of his dreams. Its colours are so tame, its outlines hint so faintly and feebly of the graceful forms they should reveal. Can it be that anything worthy should ever grow from so imperfect a beginning? Mistrust says, "No, leave it, cast it aside. It has deceived you, you can do no more."

Let him listen to that voice, and all is lost. Labour and design have alike been wasted. But let him take heart and go on, even though it be but slowly, and with little hope, and ere long light will dawn again. Once more the willing hand shall

truly serve the creating mind. Those colours that seemed so poor and dim shall deepen into beauty. As he works on, there shall come back to him the glow and the glory of his first love. It was but a passing cloud. Will and power were still there, only he was faint-hearted, and could not discern them. He will fear no more now. Steadily he will go on, until the picture is complete, and all say of it, "How fair!"

Like to the artist's work, is that other and more glorious picture of a human life, to those who, with earnest care and patient thought, are striving to make it perfect. Far off, but not too far for faith's strong sight, is their divine ideal. Striving, they will surely win to it. They have the will, they have the power. The untouched canvas

is all their own as yet, and the picture shall be so beautiful. But to them, too, before the work is complete, doubt and weariness come. They look at what they have done, and there is no beauty in it. Yonder is their ideal, so divine; here their actual, so poor and mean. The colours with which they thought to do so much, are faded now. How can they paint a golden sunset with the dim tints of a November sky; how, with uncertain hand and bewildered eye, bid to spring forth upon that spoiled canvas any shape of beauty or delight? And the tired heart says, "It is enough. All is over."

Yet this cloud, too, will pass away. The colours are all there still, it is only the darkness that hides them. Hand and eye have but lost their skill for a little while.

Work on, though it be in gloom and doubt. Work on, though no bright glow of hope tells you that you are working for success. Work on, though it be with aching eye and nerveless hand, and ere long you too, so despairing now, shall bring to the great Master a life of which He shall say, "Well done."

To this middle stage Nils Brayton had reached, long ago, when he came home humble and disappointed, bringing with him the memory of a spoiled past, and only faint hope that the future might redeem it. To this stage Hester had come now, with a past marred as deeply as his, though not by guilt.

She began her life-picture one bright April day, when the trees which autumn had just now stripped were shaking out their

young tresses in the sunshine. She thought it would be a very beautiful picture. She had worked at it hopefully, day by day adding fresh colours, day by day coming nearer to the fair ideal which her fancy shaped. She knew no weariness, she felt no doubt; hers was the willing heart, hers the skilful right hand; until one day there was no more power to work. All the sunlight had died out. She had no bright colours left. Worse than that, the right hand had lost its cunning, the graceful fancy its power to create. She could but stand and weep bitter tears over what had been so fair. She could but mourn for labour spent in vain, for a past wherein was no content, and a future wherein was no hope. Helplessly and very sadly now, Hester looked at her spoiled picture.

Yet was it quite spoiled? Might she not, like the overworn artist, wake after short rest to find both will and power returned? Might she not, drying her tear-dimmed eyes, lift them once more to that lost ideal, and find it transfigured into a diviner glory, even the glory that excelleth? There, the future could never be so bright and sunny. Many a picture that was begun for the golden morning time, has changed, ere the artist finished it, to the calm stillness of evening. Yet the master will not less truly say of such, "well done." Nay, perhaps that work into which, by no sin of the worker, the deepest shades have come, shall have the most honourable place in heaven's great gallery.

Hester had suffered, but she had done no wrong. And it is only wrong doing that can harm. No grief or disappointment can

hurt the true soul. They will but give more strength. They are enemies, which, nobly conquered, yield their weapons to the victor, that he may do worthier battle with the next foe. She had been wounded, but not unto death. There was hope still, that she might rise and win.

And yet. For a woman whose life lies before her, whose youth is scarcely overpassed, is not content to say farewell to all the rose light of hope and promise, and place her hand in the hard clasp of duty. Duty, a safe guide, truly, but sometimes stern and always cold. Duties; yes, Hester had plenty of duties to do, but the heart is not large that can be filled up by duty only, nothing more than duty. Some poet talks of the quiet content of duties well performed and days well spent, but these never made any human life happy, and the

good God never intended that they should. Duty and content may sometimes go hand-in-hand; but not duty and sweet over-brimming happiness.

Hester had had her own little dream castle, though she had never shown anyone, not even May, the fair prospect which it over-looked, nor the rich treasures she had gathered there. No one but Jane Fawcet, who found out so much and told so little, knew about that dream castle; how bright it was, how fair. Now it was all swept away, and Hester felt homeless, ten times more homeless than if she had never built a dream castle, or filled it with all manner of goodly and pleasant things. Would she ever build another? Would she be like the wise little children, who, when their sand house has been washed down by the flowing tide, wait patiently for that tide to

ebb—as it always does—and then build another; or wiser still, go higher and build where no tide ever reaches, build above high water mark, on the rock that is always safe?

Hester could not tell. She only knew that she must keep all these things to herself. Everything must go on just as before. She must attend to her duties, and keep up her spirits, and look after little May, and be very kind to her, just as she had done before this came. Above all, she must be very cheerful with Mr. Brooke, and talk pleasantly with him when he came, which would be very often now. For was he not going to be her brother, and ought not brothers and sisters to be very happy amongst each other? Was it not one of the pleasantest and most comfortable relationships, brother and sister?

"Sister Hettie," how sweet those words

sounded when little May said them. With what a sharp stroke of pain could they smite sometimes, spoken by another voice than hers.

But it was all settled now, and she must be content.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Miss Lapiter heard of Mr. Brooke's engagement, which was within a week or two of its occurrence, for Angusbury was not a place where anything of that kind could be kept quiet very long, she was grievously disappointed. Joan brought the news from her sister, at whose house she had been taking tea on the afternoon of her monthly holiday, and Joan's sister heard it from the Milcote dressmaker, and the Milcote dressmaker was aunt to Thomas Bilson, the young man who had married Sally, ex-housemaid at Mr. Trede-

gar's; and Sally had heard it one evening from Margaret, who never said anything that could not be depended upon like a printed book for truthfulness. So it was a fact—a clear, well-authorised fact, and Miss Lapiter lamented accordingly.

If there was one thing which the mistress of Rose Cottage looked forward to with more confident expectation than another, it was going down to Milcote Church some day during the ensuing summer or autumn, and seeing "dear Hester," in white silk and orange-blossom, given away by Mr. Tredegar to Basil Brooke. A precious gift, too, such as any man might be thankful for; for where was there a young lady in all Angusbury who would make so excellent a wife as dear Hester, combining beauty and intelligence and amiability with an

amount of this world's possessions which would render her a most valuable help to any young man of family who had his way to make in life?

Indeed Miss Lapiter had considered the affair as almost settled for the last six months, ever since that evening when dear Hester had come to Rose Cottage to tea, and Mr. Brooke had been so very attentive, so much more attentive than there was any occasion for, unless he had serious intentions. And, though she had never breathed a syllable of the kind to the young lady herself, for Hester was one of those reserved, distant girls you don't feel at liberty to open your mind to on such subjects, yet she had always looked upon her as destined at no very distant period to remove Mr. Brooke from furnished lodgings

to a home on his own account. And though of course it would be a loss to herself, as respectable, single gentlemen were difficult to meet with for board and residence, still she had such confidence in dear Hester's suitability, that she could look forward with perfect satisfaction to the prospect of having her best parlour and lodging-room put into the *Angusbury Chronicle* again, at so much per week, or retaken—which would certainly be pleasanter—by private recommendation. Nay, so inevitable had Mr. Brooke's removal appeared, that Miss Lapiter had fixed successively on half a dozen houses which were advertised to let, with possession during the ensuing summer, and she had a suite of walnut furniture in her eye at that moment—figuratively of course—which would be just the thing for young

people beginning housekeeping on moderate means, and those were the means upon which Mr. Brooke would most likely have to begin it. And she had got everything so nicely fixed in her own mind—how many servants they would keep, and what sort of style they would live in, and at what hour they should dine to accommodate the classes—and how she should drop in to tea now and then, say, perhaps, once a month, and have such a cosy chat with dear Hester; and how, when there was evening work at the School of Art, dear Hester would feel lonely and bring her sewing over to Rose Cottage, until Basil—how pleasant it would be to hear her call him Basil—came in to fetch her home. And now all these pleasant fancies had come to an untimely end. Things had been so per-

verse lately, that really it called for almost an unattainable amount of faith to believe that they always happened for the best.

That was what Miss Lapiter said to herself, for want of anyone else to say it to, when Joan brought the intelligence of Mr. Brooke's engagement. But Miss Lapiter did not care for saying things to herself, since in that case she missed the benefit of an answering opinion; and so next morning, as soon as household matters were arranged for the day, she trotted down to Lellandsbank and made Mrs. Brayton the repository of her disappointment. She found that lady alone, well pleased, as elderly people generally are, at the prospect of a little friendly chat to vary the monotony of a quiet life. Miss Lapiter spent no time in

preliminary observations, but after divulging the fact of the engagement, which was unexpected news to Mrs. Brayton, and also the possible length of time which Joan had heard might elapse before its consummation, she launched forth at large into the different bearings of the subject.

"A mistake, Mrs. Brayton, if ever there was a mistake made in this world, and one that I should never have thought a man of Mr. Brooke's discernment would have fallen into. For I must say, and you know I have had good opportunity for observing him, I never did meet with a man who had a better notion of making a bargain for himself, always knows the price of butter, and who gives best weight, and how many ounces to the pound, and what eggs are selling for in the market, and what

you ought to give for a fowl dressed for boiling; very proper, of course, for an unmarried man in lodgings, and I'm sure I never blamed him for being so exact, and counting the eggs when Joan brought them home, or for borrowing my scales when we got the idea that Mr. Shaker gave short weight in tea and sugar; but I should have thought the same discretion would have guided him in the choice of a wife. Now, don't you think so, Mrs. Brayton, that the same discretion ought to have guided him in the choice of a wife?"

Mrs. Brayton did think so, though she did not seem to share Miss Lapiter's disappointment at the direction which that choice had taken.

"But he will find out his mistake before long," continued Miss Lapiter. "Take my

word for it, Mr. Brooke will wish himself back in furnished lodgings again before he has been married six months. Such a child, indeed, to have the control of a house, or enter upon the responsibilities of life. Why, my dear Mrs. Brayton, she can do nothing in the world but flutter about and make paper flowers. And very prettily she makes them too, I won't deny that. I've seen azalias of hers that would take the prize at a flower-show for size and beauty and general naturalness; but you know, my dear Mrs. Brayton, a man, if he has his eyes properly open, will look for more than that in a partner for life. And though she is as graceful as a young canary bird now, yet she is just the sort of person that will get stout in the course of a few years, and then fluttering will be out of

the question. And when she can't flutter any longer, and paper flowers have gone out of fashion, what are both of them to do, I wonder?"

That was certainly a momentous question. And as she asked it, Miss Lapiter began to rub her hands restlessly. She had a habit of

> "Washing her hands with invisible soap,
> In imperceptible water,"

when she got excited about anything, and no one could deny that the picture she had just drawn of Mr. Brooke's matrimonial future was painful enough to call for excitement.

"Yes my dear Mrs. Brayton, what are they to do, indeed? And to think of the wife that he might have had, if he had been sensible enough to turn his attention to the

other sister. Why, I've said over and over again that a man would need to marry twenty ordinary women to get all the qualities which she combines in her own proper person. The dear girl is equally at home in the store-room, the sick-room, the drawing-room, the library, the studio, or every other department whatever of a well regulated family; and how many are there, dear Mrs. Brayton, to whom you could give such a character as that? Now just look round on the Angusbury young ladies in general, and consider what chance of happiness a man would have with any of them?"

Miss Lapiter had got upon her favourite topic now, the shortcomings of the present race of young ladies; and she was waxing into long paragraphs, as she always did when she got upon that topic; paragraphs

which called neither for answer nor comment, only patient hearing.

"None at all, I should say, my dear Mrs. Brayton. And if ever I do feel thankful for not being born a gentleman, it is when I survey the feminine portion of Angusbury, as it presents itself to view in a series of morning calls, or the aspects of social life. Because you know if a man contrives to pick out from among them a woman that can love him—and I always say, Mrs. Brayton, that some girls' hearts hold love in solution, like jars of melted sugar, in a confectioner's cooling-room, ready to crystalise as soon as anything is put in for it to crystalise upon; and no matter how worthless a thing it is, a bit of crooked wire or rough stick, sometimes the rougher the better, the sugar will settle upon it, and be thankful for the

opportunity—well, then, as I said before, he may find someone to love him; but then as likely as not she can't do anything else, and only think what a pitiable creature a man is whose wife can do nothing but love him—can't housekeep for him, can't keep his buttons under control, can't make him light puddings, and brown gravies, and savoury dishes, and nice hot suppers, or any of those domestic comforts which men have a natural weakness for. Now, isn't such a man a pitiable object, dear Mrs. Brayton?"

Mrs. Brayton could not deny the position. Such a man was certainly a most pitiable object.

"Yes. Well, and then, if he meets with someone who can cook nicely, her intellect all goes in that direction. Everlasting

pantry; frying-pans, and preserving pots from morning to night, and when the poor man would like to improve his mind, and hers too, by a little enlightened conversation, her faculties have all sunk into the kitchen, and she keeps wondering whether cook has remembered to clarify the dripping, or if the made wine wants looking after, to see if fermentation has commenced. I'm sure I don't know whether all affection or all pantry is most be deplored. And perhaps if he tries again, he hits upon a female of commanding attainments, like Miss Macray, the solicitor's daughter, who reads Abercrombie on the 'Intellectual Powers,' by way of recreation, and does astronomical problems in her sleep. And in that case, when the husband comes home tired and worried with business, and would give al-

most anything for her to be quiet, or if she must talk, to let it be about something small, she doses him with mental philosophy or political economy, or she bears down upon him with a ponderous argument upon the monetary resources of the country. And he's obliged to seem as if he knew all about it, for of course a man can't bear his wife to be cleverer than himself, can he now, dear Mrs. Brayton?"

"Certainly not," replied that lady, "unless she has the happy art of concealing it in public. But I think we may congratulate Mr. Brooke on not having commanding attainments to battle with in his intended wife. I have never heard Miss May venture into moral philosophy or monetary resources; neither is she very likely to worry him with political economy."

"Not she, indeed. I don't suppose she ever takes a newspaper in her hand, except to spread it under the canary's cage when he is taking his cold bath; and she only does that because Margaret tells her to do it, on account of the carpet. But, Mrs. Brayton, if the terrible alternative were presented to me, I think I would choose everlasting pantry or commanding attainments, rather than a wife who could do nothing but flutter. It's shocking to think of it—why, it's worse than being united for life to the fly-wheel of a steam-engine that has no notion of moral responsibility, or anything of the sort. And to reflect what a wife he *might* have had."

"But," said Mrs. Brayton, who, like her companion, was accustomed to look on the bright side of things, and even sometimes,

as on the present occasion, surpassed Miss Lapiter in that valuable art, "we may hope that little Miss May will awake to the realities of life by-and-by. Most women do that sooner or later."

"She won't, then," answered the impracticable spinster. "May Tredegar is as wide awake at this moment as ever she will be, either in this world, or——"

And Miss Lapiter paused for a little while, looking steadily out into the quiet Lellandsbank garden.

"I was going to say in the next. But really, Mrs. Brayton, I have wondered sometimes whether there is such a thing as a next world for such butterflies as May Tredegar. One would like to think that they are snuffed out forthwith, when the present life comes to an end; for I'm sure they

can't be wanted up in heaven, where there's neither fluttering nor paper-flower making going on, so far as I am able to learn from revelation; and they seem too innocent to be disposed of in the other direction; and we don't hear of any intermediate state in which they can trifle elegantly throughout eternity; and so what is to become of them, unless they are snuffed out, I can't tell. But I don't touch theology, Mrs. Brayton. Never did. I'm lost directly when I get into expositions, and that sort of thing. We are a set of very weak children, the best of us, and all we can do is to keep fast hold of the Great Father's hand. We shall get safe to the end, then, somehow. But it's a mistake, Mrs. Brayton—I mean the engagement, and Mr. Brooke will find that out before long."

And with this remark, an unusually profound one for Miss Lapiter, who was not in the habit of dipping much below the surface in doctrinal matters or personal experience, she buttoned her gloves, and trotted home again, leaving Mrs. Brayton to meditate on the unexpected turn which affairs had taken at Milcote.

Not unpleasant meditations, judging from the contented smile which they left on the old lady's face. Miss Lapiter was welcome to her own opinions, and any amount of vivacity in the expression of them; but it was doubtful, after all, whether Nils Brayton's mother thought that Mr. Brooke had made such an unpardonable mistake in passing over Hester Tredegar, and fixing his affections on the younger sister.

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER that came six quiet months, months in which nobody did anything worth chronicling. Angusbury lived its usual hum-drum life. The godmothers, widows, and maiden aunts of the place, dressed, gossiped, and went out to tea at stated intervals, with a view to cards and conversation. The little boys poured down the streets in a periodic tide; the elder ones got into tail coats and fancy ties, and then mysteriously disappeared, leaving their female relatives as a legacy to the continually thickening deposit of elderly gen-

tlewomen, which threatened at no distant period entirely to choke the town. The *Angusbury Chronicle* published its customary list of births, marriages, and deaths, and a column of local intelligence, which the inhabitants read with praiseworthy punctuality; but nothing occurred to mar the well-bred equanimity of the place, or rouse it from that placid slumber into which some magnetic hand appeared to have cast it, centuries gone by.

Nils Brayton came and went along the lonely Lellandsbank road, as he had done for five years past, upright, straightforward, proud. Very proud as most people called him, and as reserved as he was proud. Not at all a favourite with the respectable families of Angusbury, who liked to know all about a man—what he had

been, whence he had come, and how he had behaved from the earliest period of his life to the present time. None of which facts they could at all decide upon concerning Nils Brayton.

Nor did he think it needful that they should. The past, whatever it might have been, lay between God and his own soul. What right had any human being to lift that veil which repentance and forgiveness had cast over it? That he lived a pure and noble life now, that with true-hearted striving he fought against the wrong and cherished the right, was enough. To no one, not even to Hester, was there any need for him to reveal that for which God had forgiven him, and for which he was earnestly labouring to atone. He might be wrong, but it was not a matter in which

man could be his judge. Like the dawn of longed-for morning, had been those words of Hester's, that from all error we may win to a nobler life, nay, that from even our very errors we may draw the bitter medicine which shall guide us back again to health. Some day he would tell her all that those words had been to him.

And that day need not be far off now. He had waited long to know where the home would be which he meant to ask her to share with him. Now, that seemed settled; at least, so far settled as things generally are for men in his line of life. The corps to which he belonged was to be ordered abroad that year, most likely to India. Would she go with him? If so, the dreary, reproachful past might at length be forgotten. Life would be full of joy

for him, and he knew that the love which had waited so long and so patiently could make it full of joy for her too.

May was to be married at midsummer. After all, May was not quite such a butterfly creature as Miss Lapiter represented her during that somewhat waspish conversation which took place at Lellandsbank. But then Miss Lapiter made those remarks under the influence of disappointment, and people of lively feelings are not always to be too severely judged for what they say at such times. May did open her mind to the realities of life. At any rate, she put on an apron and went into the kitchen one morning, soon after her prospects were definitely settled. And there she listened with great seriousness, while Margaret explained to her that such and such ingre-

dients, mixed in such and such quantities, and exposed to a given degree of heat for a given length of time, would, unless some unforeseen accident intervened, result in a pudding of more or less excellence according to the quality of the materials used. Also, that the same amount of heat, applied in the direction of a fowl or small joint of meat, would work sundry modifications in the chemical arrangement of its constituent particles, converting it into an eligible, wholesome, and agreeable article of diet. Which facts May noted down in the daintiest little satin-covered pocket-book, lest she should forget them. And she determined that she would say it all over to herself, instead of singing a French song next time she sat down to make paper flowers.

And then Margaret, still accompanied by the fair neophyte, proceeded to the store-room, and explained how—at certain seasons of the year—currants, strawberries, apricots, and plums would require to be bought, boiled, tied down in jars, labelled and arranged for future use in a dry closet, being taken down at proper intervals and looked into, in case specks of mould should appear, or signs of fermentation manifest themselves. Also in what quantities soap should be ordered in, and candles, and tea, and sugar; and how the soap should be cut with a wire and left to dry in separate cubes, that being a very economical plan for persons with moderate means; and the candles hung up out of reach of mice, who had a great taste for them, and the tea excluded from the air in tin canisters, with

the quality and colour labelled on the outside. And May listened gravely, taking notes in her pocket-book, wondering how in the world Margaret could contain such an amount of wisdom underneath those white cap borders of hers, and keep it all in its place, too, one thing never mixing up with another, or running into something else, as she was quite sure it would if she had to remember it. And when the serious mood was in the ascendant, she would look over her notes, and wonder whether it was the fowl or the pudding that had to be tied in a cloth before boiling, and whether the tea or the preserves were to be sprinkled with sugar and tied down in earthenware jars with labels on the outside. She had really quite forgotten, she must go and take another lesson from Margaret, who

knew so much about all these things.

So there was hope that in progress of time May would be able to take a moderately honourable degree in housekeeping science, though it was not likely that she would ever become "all pantry," or even reach the more ambitious summits of domestic skill. But of course Mr. Brooke would not like her to be all pantry. Indeed, how could he ever wish her to be anything else than what she was, his own little pink and white May-blossom, the sweetest that sunshine ever opened, or evening dew descended on? No, the housekeeping would come in its own time; there was no need to take thought for it yet.

Jane Fawcet, too, lived on soberly as anyone in sober little Angusbury. The

fierce flames of passion, which, ten years ago, blazed up so angrily, driving her forth from home and friends, over the wide sea, anywhere, anywhere, so that only she might find revenge, had burned down now to a steady glow, which smouldered quietly enough beneath the embers which covered and concealed its heat.

She had been nearly a year at Milcote, and yet she seemed no nearer the accomplishment of the purpose for which she had gone there, and bent her proud neck under that yoke of servitude, so galling often and oppressive. How little Mr. Tredegar knew, when in his sharp, autocratic way he required from her some menial duty, what spirit even more unbending than his own had to be curbed and turned back, ere with dumb uncomplaining submission she

fulfilled his commands. Little did honest Margaret think what memories of wealth and luxury that silent, sharp-faced woman could recall, who, when the day's work was done, used to sit with folded hands by the kitchen fire, so subdued and servant-like, never murmuring for any impatient word that might be spoken to her, or any servile office that she had to do.

All this borne, and yet no nearer to the end. May lived on, bright and happy in her love; May, whose little thread of life she once thought to have snapped asunder. Even Hester seemed slowly winning back again to rest and peace. Something of the old content was dawning on her face. At times it was more than content. Was Nils Brayton, whose will was so strong, whose power so great, drawing her to himself?

Was he going to reach forth his hand and take her into the shelter of his stern goodness? For Jane felt somehow that he *was* good; that those years which had only hardened her, had been leading him on to a purer life. Were they going to be happy together, and could she do nothing to stay it?

Sometimes she thought she would confront him boldly. She would doff this servant garb, she would throw away this close white cap which hid such a wealth of rippling hair, hair that she had braided for him once. She would break in upon them as they sat in that quiet Milcote parlour, and bring back to him all the guilty past, which he had buried so carefully that no one in Angusbury knew of its grave. She would bend that proud head

of his, she would bring down that lofty look. She would bow him with shame and humiliation, so that none should know him for the same Nils Brayton who had walked so grandly among them. It could so easily be done by a few little words.

But what then? What should she have gained? In his headstrong, passionate youth she had won from him a promise, of which, when reason returned, he repented. Thousands of men and women do the same thing, and no one blames them for it. That her single life had been wasted and spoiled thereby, was of little consequence. She should have controlled herself, as these quiet, well-bred Englishwomen do. She should have smothered down her wounded pride, and married one of the gallant cavaliers who sought her smiles; and lived a

comfortable, respectable, fashionable life, instead of giving way to her passions, and flying across the seas and risking life and honour and everything for the one thought of revenge. That was what the sober, decent people of Angusbury would say to her. Then she should have to leave her situation without a character, of course, for who would give her one after that? And still Nils Brayton would marry Hester, just as if nothing had been said.

Her revenge could not be accomplished in that way. She must wait patiently. She could see no light as yet, but it would come—it would surely come. For a little longer she must plod on through this household drudgery, and crouch to Mr. Tredegar, and curtsy to her mistress, and humour

Miss May's pretty whims, and wait upon Nils Brayton with obedient, servant-like deference, when he sat as a guest at her master's table. Nils Brayton, whose work it was that she had to look back upon a life so black and withered. And was he to be happy, and was the future to hold anything precious for him?

Jane Fawcet set her teeth together and looked out of that casement window into the gloom of summer night.

"No, never!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AND so the days went on, until one sunny July morning, when Angusbury was doing its best to look attractive, when the birds were singing their loudest, and the rose trees in Milcote garden were just one crimson flush of blossom, May Tredegar took upon her pretty white shoulders the cares and responsibilities of married life.

How she bore them; whether the difficulties incident to pudding-making and domestic management, crushed her little abilities to the dust; or whether, sturdily contending with them, satin-covered note-book in

hand, she at last rose proudly triumphant; whether Miss Lapiter's prophecy was fulfilled by Basil Brooke wishing himself back in furnished lodgings before the end of six months, or whether that good lady lived to see Mrs. Brooke a paragon of household excellence, are questions with which just now we have not the slightest concern. Enough that it was a quiet, pretty wedding. Very quiet, as, indeed, any wedding party ought to be that set out from that quaint many-gabled house, and gathered before the time-mouldered altar of Milcote Church, that altar before which so many brides had stood, and beneath which so many corpses lay buried. But the old women of the village, and the maiden ladies of Angusbury who had walked over to see the sight—Angusbury feminine had a great weakness for

weddings—said that a lovelier bride had never trodden the daisies beneath her feet, nor a handsomer bridegroom bent his head to pass under that old Saxon porch, which was the pride and glory of Milcote Church.

Then came the wedding breakfast, also very quiet, when the usual pretty speeches were made, and the usual congratulations were offered, and everyone tried to look happy, though at the same time they wished it was over. Then the bride and groom set off to some of those delightful nooks of southern England, where sensible, middle-class people, who cannot afford a Continental tour, do generally repair on such occasions, returning, after a suitable interval, to a perfect little gem of a house, which Mr. Brooke had fitted up just as an artist's home ought

to be fitted up—everything tasteful and graceful and delicate. Indeed, Miss Lapiter, who was privileged to go over it before Mr. and Mrs. Basil came home, said it was more like a place for a fairy than for ordinary flesh and blood mortals. Such sweet little *papier-maché* chairs, inlaid with snowdrops and green leaves; and muslin curtains so airy and delicate that almost a breath would have blown them out of the window amongst the geraniums and rose trees; and crystal flower vases with silver net-work over them; and a case for ferns; and the loveliest water-colour pictures on the walls, of glens and cascades, and mountain landscapes, which made you quite forget that you were in such a dull, stupid, flat place as Angusbury. A perfect love of a house, Miss Lapiter said, only she hoped the furniture would wear

better than its mistress seemed likely to wear. Miss Lapiter had not entirely recovered her good temper yet, perhaps it was doubtful whether she would ever be able from the bottom of her heart to forgive Mr. Brooke for marrying the wrong lady, as she felt more and more convinced he had done when he put that ring on May Tredegar's finger.

The coming home was followed by a state appearance at church, during which May was so flurried that she could not find the places in her prayer-book, or bring away the slightest recollection of the heads of the discourse. For the ladies looked at her so; May felt quite sure they were wondering how much her lovely pearl gray silk cost a yard, and whether her white chip bonnet, with a wreath of orange buds inside, had

been sent down from London, or made by an Angusbury milliner.

After the state appearance at church, followed the congratulatory calls, which Angusbury always considered it necessary to pay on such occasions. Two whole days of nothing but calls and compliments, through which May was expected to sit in her bridal attire, and talk about the weather and the beautiful prospects in the south of England, where she had been for her wedding excursion.

That was almost worse than the state appearance at church, for it made her feel so strange to be called "Mrs. Brooke," and spoken to with that respectful deference which visitors generally use to newly-married ladies. She would much rather have been chirping to the canary, or

arranging flowers in the silver-netted vases. Indeed May did not know how she should have got over it at all, but for Sister Hettie, who took the trouble off her hands so nicely, and thought of something to say whenever the conversation got to the last stage of thinness, a crisis which not unfrequently happened during those two days of congratulatory calls.

Miss Tredegar had "gone off" rather of late, so the Angusbury ladies said to each other when they had taken leave of the bride and were returning to their respective parades and terraces. She looked pale and out of spirits. It might be reaction after the fatigue of nursing her sister through that long, tedious illness; that sort of thing often began to tell after months had passed away. And everybody knew how beautifully

she had behaved during her sister's illness; how she had watched over Miss May like a mother, and, as they might say, almost brought her back to life again; for Dr. Mackay had said to some of his other patients that, next to medical skill, which of course was always the immediate means of cure, Miss May owed her recovery to careful nursing. It was that, Angusbury feminine decided, combined with natural regret for the loss of her sister, which had made Miss Tredegar "go off" so lately.

And then Angusbury feminine began to wonder whether Miss Tredegar would marry soon. It rather thought not. When a younger sister married first, it sometimes happened that the elder was left for an indefinite period, and Miss Tredegar began to have the aspect of a person who was likely to be

"left." She had lost much of her youthful sprightliness, she did not dress quite so elegantly as before, she confined herself almost entirely to the house, or to country walks, scarcely ever coming into Angusbury except to see her sister. All these little indications Angusbury noted, and gave Miss Tredegar a prospective settlement in that residuum of maiden ladies, with which the town was already so largely blessed.

After May's wedding Milcote came back to its old quietness. The quietness of those days when Mr. Tredegar used to sit up in his study from morning to night, or Hester amused herself with drawing and painting, and Sally bustled after her work so industriously, whistling a hymn tune sometimes by way of accompaniment. Nay, it was more than the quietness of those old

days, for Jane Fawcet never whistled over *her* work, or startled the echoes of those long passages with a stray laugh, such as Sally would ring out sometimes when Thomas Bilson was talking to her at the kitchen door. Jane Fawcet had no followers, she told Margaret she could not bear them, and Margaret said she was very wise. Margaret had never encouraged followers herself, either.

It seemed like a dream when May was gone that she had ever been home at all, things fell so completely into the old track, from which, for awhile, her bright presence and merry winning ways had moved them. Mr. Tredegar began to study as diligently as ever, only coming down when a chance visitor called, or meals were announced. Perhaps it was a relief to him, rather than

otherwise, to be able to be quiet, to sit up in that dusty, paper-strewn lair of his, and never be disturbed by fingers tatooing on the door, or a rosy face coming between him and his maps, or a pair of mischievous hands snatching his book away just when he had got into the middle of a dense argument. He had borne all this sort of thing pleasantly for a little while, but he would no doubt have tired of it had it continued much longer. Mr. Tredegar was a man that liked to be quiet. The most he asked anyone to do for him was to let him alone. That was just why Hester suited him so well. She never interfered with him, never broke in upon him, never dragged him away from his studies to make him talk to her and caress her, like that little May-blossom who had just been blown

away from Milcote to flutter and frisk in a home of her own.

And as the establishment generally had resumed its former habits, Hester must do the same. She must get out her drawing materials, and look up her favourite books, and get a set of new covers for her tract district, and resume her class in the Sunday School—which May had obliged her to give up, because she said it made the Sunday so stupid at home—and in various other ways fit herself back again into that groove of useful employments along which she had once journeyed with a certain negative sort of happiness. Miss Lapiter said there was nothing like useful employment for making people settle down after an exciting time, such a time, for instance, as May's wedding must have been to the Milcote people.

So she tried. But it would not do. She might put the machinery in order, but the spring which should have moved it refused to work. There was no going back again, for Hester, to the old past and the old content. She had tasted for a little while the glory and the sweetness of life, and that glory and that sweetness once tasted, could never be quite forgotten. Patiently though she might follow the old round of duty, she would never satisfy herself with it again. She had grown both to enjoy and to suffer. That brief bright sunlight streaming on her had unfolded all her nature. She could no more fold it up again within the old bounds than the opened rose can close and be a bud once more.

And now there seemed to be nothing to look forward to. Before, when her life

went drearily on, when the little round of duty lost its power to content, there was always one bright spot for hope to light upon. And that was May's coming home to stay always. Her sister May, whom she had promised to take care of, and be very kind to. She had kept that promise, though to keep it had taken all the joy out of her life. May's morning was her night. Now, that care was no more needed. Another had taken from her the trust which it had been first her gladness, and then her sorrow, to fulfil. There was no one now who wanted her very much; no one who would grieve very much, she thought, if she were to die and have done with all. Should it always be so? Patience and Duty, Duty and Patience, none but these two cold guides to company her to the

end? She looked backward, and saw the best of her life there. She looked forward and saw years, perhaps many years, through which she should have to walk alone, with no hand to hold hers or to guide her over the rough places through which those years might lead. And none but those who have looked into such a future, know how dark it is.

CHAPTER IX.

IT was towards the close of August, when May had been married nearly two months, that Hester sat with her work in the broad low window-seat of the Milcote parlour. That same window-seat from which once she used to start away so quickly if Basil Brooke made his appearance under the sycamore trees by the gate; that same window-seat, where, little more than a year ago, May was sitting with her lap full of paper azalias, when a tall gentleman with grey hair came up the walk.

And at the sight of him she had vanished so rapidly, only just peeping through the banisters to catch a glimpse of him, as Jane Fawcet ushered him into the parlour. That tall gentleman with grey hair was May's husband now, and Hester was "Sister Hettie" to both of them. What very quick work it had been!

Hester was not stitching away very industriously; no one could on such an evening, for the sunlight made such quivering shadows on the grass, and flushed so warmly on the old stone wall with its patches of moss and lichen which separated that end of the garden from the meadows beyond. And it poured down like a shower of gold through the trees in Milcote Lane, those trees which were just beginning to take a brown tint here and there upon

their deep green leaves. They had just got that tint, last year at this time, when Miss Lapiter came to make her final arrangements about the picnic to the Monk's Crag. "Last year at this time," and to Hester it seemed like half a life-time.

Mr. and Mrs. Basil Brooke did not very often come to Milcote. Perhaps by-and-by, when the first brightness of married bliss had faded off, they might find it an agreeable change to spend their evenings away from home; but for the present they were entirely taken up with each other, absorbed in a lustrous, French-polish sort of happiness, which seemed to match the *papier-maché* chairs, and Swiss muslin curtains, and crystal flower-vases of the little gem of a house, as Miss Lapiter called it.

Mr. Tredegar's tall chair, as rigid and straight-backed as himself, stood in its accustomed place by the book-case, and on a little table near it the folio of topographical researches which he was at present engaged upon. It was six o'clock now. In another hour he would come downstairs to tea. Then that ponderous folio would be opened, and, once drawn into the vortex of its contents, no more would be heard of him until bedtime, unless someone happened to come, which was not very likely to be the case. Mr. Tredegar almost lived in his study now, just as he used to do before May came home. Except during that evening diet of reading, which for all social purposes was as useless as if the reader had been made of marble, Hester was left quite to herself. If Mr. Tredegar only

asked to be let alone, he certainly gave as much as he asked.

The chief break in this monotonous life was when Nils Brayton came in for half an hour after office work was over. He always seemed to bring a waft of fresh, wholesome air into that quiet house. Mr. Tredegar did not care for Angusbury gossip, but he liked to hear a little of what was going on in the great world outside, and that Nils Brayton could tell him. And in all his ways of looking at things there was that strong, steady common sense, which a woman always values far above what are called shining conversational powers. Hester had learned to depend upon what Nils Brayton said. He never talked very much to her, and never had anything very remarkable to bring forward—no graceful compliments, no

poetic allusions, no happy sparkling thoughts, no delicate little jets of satire, such as those which Basil Brooke could throw so lightly over men and women that he knew. Yet she felt there was that in him which would be for ever safe and true. She could have gone to him if any trouble had happened, feeling quite sure that, so far as help lay in his power, he would give it to her.

That was no new feeling. She had had it a long time. She felt it, just as now, that April night, when he had come home with her from Lellandsbank through the gloom and mist. She felt it, too, that other night, when she met the stranger woman from Alton, and turned back with her to the station, thereby earning for herself a walk in the dark, from the fear of

which his unexpected appearance had relieved her. And she felt it now just the same—a quiet, comfortable sense of rest and safety whenever he was near. But even this little variety which his visits afforded, would soon come to an end. Mr. Brayton was going away in a few months, perhaps to India, perhaps to the Cape, certainly somewhere very far away, so that they should never see him again. And then Milcote would indeed be lonely.

This was not the sort of life that Hester would have chosen—far from it. But it was the one that had been given to her, and she tried to make the best of it. This was her course; she must run it patiently. When the time came that any other course would be better for her, she believed that somehow she should be guided into it. As

Margaret used to say, and there was often much practical wisdom in what Margaret used to say,

"Keep along in the straight path, honey, the straight path; and don't be over-keen to burst that as seems to keep you from freedom and liberty. If things is a bit small for you, don't tear 'em off of a sudden. The best way ever I heard tell on to get rid of a garment as doesn't fit, is to *grow* out of it. Just keep along growing, and it stands to reason as the garment and you must part afore long. There's a vast o' folk in this world, honey, as finds theirselves sore let and hindered with garments as don't fit; and no blame to them neither, for they didn't make 'em theirselves—it's just the contrairyness of things as nobody can help. But, bless the Lord! it

won't be always so. And when I'm set studying on these here things, it's sweetly laid upon my mind that same as in spring-time, when we never ask it, and don't think nought about it, the good Lord is weaving a beautiful garment of leaves and flowers for this here earth, so, while we're doing our little best, and toiling and striving, and suffering, He's making a shining robe for us up in Heaven; and one day, when we've got our full growth, he'll clothe us in it. And that garment will never pinch us, and we'll never want to cast it no more."

That was what the Milcote housekeeper had said one day, not very long ago, when her young mistress was wishing for something to bring a little fresh life into that dim, quiet home. And perhaps Hester might

be thinking about it to-night, as she sat with folded hands, looking out into the autumn sunshine.

There was a footstep on the path. Hester raised her eyes. No need to start away. She only put her work aside, and went to receive the visitor.

The footstep was Nils Brayton's. Jane Fawcet knew that well enough, as she went to answer his firm double knock. She knew the question that would be asked,

"Is Mr. Tredegar engaged?"

Of course he was engaged; and she meant to say so, for then Mr. Brayton always went away. That question had been asked and that answer given many times, and Jane would give it as long as she could.

But this time she was disappointed. Mr.

Brayton was already in the hall when she got there. Miss Tredegar had seen him, then, as he came up the walk, and had gone to open the door for him. With a darkened face Jane Fawcet went back to the kitchen. She knew that Mr. Brayton was going abroad soon, and that he had lately been in London on some business connected with that departure. She had learned this partly by a chat with Ruth Bennet a few days ago, when she had contrived to be sent with a message to Lellandsbank, and partly by loitering in the parlour during one of Miss Lapiter's lengthy calls. Miss Lapiter's calls, especially when she stayed to tea, were wonderful opportunities for hearing all that was going on amongst the Angusbury people. And Jane felt that this visit of his meant something.

Would he go away rich and proud? Had he come to win what she knew he had been seeking so long? Jane Fawcet ground her teeth at the thought of it. She would wait patiently, though. Her time would come, even yet.

Nils Brayton staid late that evening. Perhaps Mr. Tredegar was in a more sociable mood than usual; he did vary sometimes, according to the state of the weather. Or perhaps there was no pressing need that Mr. Brayton should return home to enliven his mother's solitude, as Miss Lapiter was spending the evening at Lellandsbank, and wherever Miss Lapiter went there was no need for any second person to keep the tide of talk in continual flow.

So, whilst Hester went on with her work, he told them of his plans and arrange-

ments; how it was at last definitely settled that he was to go abroad at the close of the year, perhaps as early as November. But Mrs. Brayton was to remain at Lellandsbank, with Ruth Bennet to take care of her. She had once said that wherever her son went she would go too; but she was feeble now, and the time was past when she could easily break up her home and seek a new one in a foreign country. So she was to stay. And Hester, hearing that, pitied her. She thought Mrs. Brayton would have gone with that son of hers to the world's end, not for his sake only, but for her own—she loved him so, her very life seemed bound up in his welfare. It seemed a dismal prospect to stay at that lonely Lellandsbank house, when the only tie that bound her to it was taken away.

And Hester, who kept her former kind-heartedness, if she had lost some of her gladness, thought that when Mr. Brayton was gone, she should try to take his place, and be a comfort to the affectionate old lady, who was thus left a widow and childless in the evening of her days.

She said something like this to Nils Brayton, for she thought he would be pleased to know that his mother's life need not be quite lonely, even when he could no longer brighten it by that tender care which he had given for so many years past.

He thanked her with few words, and a quiet, conquering sort of smile. Then he began to talk of something else.

Jane Fawcet, who was arranging the table for tea, saw that smile, and understood its meaning better than Hester did.

Had not Mrs. Bennet said, more than a year ago, that if the master went abroad he would not go alone, even though Mrs. Brayton, an aged person, and failing, stayed behind? That smile told plainly enough who he had chosen to go with him. And if, as Mrs. Bennet said also, the master had but to ask and have whatever he had set his mind upon, there was not much time left for her to work.

But she took no notice. She stepped about the room in her usual quiet, humble manner, apparently seeing nothing, listening to no word that was spoken. And her face was calm, passionless as ever, when she took the cup of tea from Hester's hands to give it to him. Had it been a cup of poison, she would have given it as calmly, perhaps far more readily.

It was almost dark when he went away. Hester opened the hall door for him. This piece of courtesy, which the Milcote people always paid to their own guests, was generally left by Mr. Tredegar to his daughter. As they stood together under the trellised porch, the little white flowers from May's jasmine-tree fell upon them both. As he watched them, did Nils Brayton think of another home, far off across the sea, over whose verandah other flowers, more fragrant even than these, had filled the night air with their fragrance, and which, falling, lay like stars on Ginevra Fossanette's dark hair?

No, that life was quite past. It was dead for him, and from its ashes a nobler one had arisen, of which this young girl, this Hester, standing so quietly beside him now, was the light and the joy.

Nils Brayton was not a man of many words, nor did he need them then. Only he kept the hand for a little while which Hester had reached out to him, and he looked right down into her face, as if he would search it through and through, yet kindly, and with that grave reverence which he always gave to her. He must have found what he sought, even in the dusk of the summer night; for while she still wondered at that searching look, he stooped down, and, quietly, as he did everything, kissed her lips.

"Hester, if you will go with me wherever I go, give me that again."

And Hester did so.

That was all.

CHAPTER X.

HAD she done wrong? Was that dumb promise rash or dangerous? Hester thought not. For when she came to think quietly about it, no tinge of regret bittered the surprise with which she looked upon a life which one little act of hers had so strangely transformed. She had told Nils Brayton nothing but the truth. She could go with him anywhere, everywhere, and feel quite safe.

Safe; yes, that was just the word. As a child that has been straying through

some tangled path, takes the kindly hand held out to it, and straightway is at rest, so she laid her hand in his, and feared no more. There was neither strife nor tumult in her heart. She had left behind her the blinding light, the bitter disappointment of the old time. She did not want the brightness of summer any more, now. She looked up and saw a quiet sky, across which no storm clouds swept, over which no sun travelled in his splendour.

That was best. How could she know that in years to come, when her mind should have recovered all its spring, she would want something more than the twilight sort of rest which satisfied it now; that her real, true self, not dead but only dormant, would wake and demand what could never more be given? She had felt

as people feel when stunned by a sudden blow; it seemed impossible that life could ever win back its former freshness, that she could ever look at things, or enjoy them as she used to do, a year ago. She was satisfied with the future to which that promise had bound her. She was even happy, with the still, peaceful happiness which sometimes lasts so long.

And there was not much time for thought. This was August. Already the leaves were dropping fast, the woods deepening into Autumn's glorious tints. Before the last of those leaves had fallen, before the ferns which fluttered so greenly on the top of the Monk's Crag—why should she think of those ferns now?—had curled up and been swept away by the November breeze, she should be crossing the deep sea

with Nils Brayton. Only three months. Not quite three months.

And had not the gipsy woman said that the deep sea would give her rest? Hester had never thought of those words since, but now they came back upon her. Yes, the woman was right. There had been a cloud; she had passed through it to something like brightness again. Now the deep sea should give her rest. It should bear her to a new life, one from which the old storm and tempest had passed away, and through whose straight, even path she might journey peacefully on until the end came.

Mr. Tredegar received the intelligence quietly, as it was his way to receive everything. Just so quietly, eleven years ago, returning with his regiment from a

long, toilsome march, he had met the servant who was sent to tell him of his wife's death. Just so quietly he had laid her in her grave under the orange trees of that warm western island. He had shed no tears, he had made no loud lamentations; but year after year of loneliness told how faithfully he held her memory still. Just so quietly when Nils Brayton asked it, he gave his consent to Hester's marriage; and then, when he was left alone again, he sat for many hours before his study table, with his head buried in his hands; only an occasional quiver of the thin, compressed lips telling that some deep emotion was ploughing its way below the surface.

Mr. Tredegar did love his children, though that love seldom showed itself, especially to Hester, by the usual fatherly manifestations.

Perhaps she did not know how true it was, because she inherited his own silent, reserved nature, quick to feel, slow to reveal that feeling by word or look. Where May would let her affection overflow in a thousand caresses, in smiles, and kisses, and playful winning ways, Hester only told it by silent, reverent duty, by acts of daughterly care which he never knew, which he never would know until her absence deprived him of them.

Next evening he came down as usual, and opened the book which he had been reading when Nils Brayton came to call. Neither spoke of the change which had come upon that quiet Milcote home, or of the parting which was so near. Only when Hester went to wish him good night, he looked at her long and wistfully.

"So soon, my child? In November, and the leaves are changing now. But you have done right. Nils Brayton is a true man. I am content."

So was Hester. Nay, more than content. For when she knew Nils Brayton better—when that broad, loving, honest nature of his unfolded itself, when he told her of the toil and labour of his life, how long the thought of her had cheered it, and how, with her love to bless, he could go cheerily forward to all that the future held for him, a glow of pride flushed over the grey twilight of her content, like the kindling of the aurora on a northern sky. It was no light thing to be what she could be to a man like this Nils Brayton.

But if Mr. Tredegar received the intelligence calmly, Miss Lapiter did nothing of

the sort. It was not her way to let joy or sorrow drop into her heart with just one solitary splash, and lie still for ever, nobody but herself so much as knowing that it was there. Miss Lapiter was like a merry little mountain stream, which lets you see right down to the bottom—not very far either—with its shining pebbles and clustering water plants, and golden sand. When the sunshine comes, it sparkles; when clouds stoop over it, it darkens, and if a rude boulder starts up and opposes its current, it lets you know all about that, too, in a wondrous little commotion, quite a miniature Niagara of foam and spray, and ineffectual resistance. Therefore, when she had heard, through Mrs. Basil Brooke, who occasionally called at Rose Cottage, of the change contemplated in the Milcote establish-

ment, she trotted thitherwards as fast as her somewhat failing powers of locomotion would carry her. At sixty-nine Miss Lapiter was not quite so active as she used to be, though still able, as she said, by the blessing of Providence, to take as much exercise as any lady in Angusbury. And a great blessing, too, for really one heard of so many people being confined to their habitations through "personal afflictive dispensations," as the local brethren used to say in their introductory prayers at the little primitive chapel, or bronchitis, or asthma, or rheumatism—of which she had never had a touch in her life, she was thankful to say—or shortness of breath, or some other ache or pain, that when a woman at her time of life was so independent of prescriptions, and never so much as knew the sight of a doc-

tor's carriage at her gate, it was a mercy for which——but we must not follow Miss Lapiter into the abundant gratitude which that estimable little lady always felt herself called upon to express when the subject of health was brought forward. That would lead us far enough away from Milcote, where she arrived, after hearing Mrs. Basil Brooke's news, in a state of brisk effervescence. Indeed, Miss Lapiter said herself that she had never been so excited since that afternoon, just a year ago now, when she panted up the windy side of the Monk's Crag, and sat down by mistake in a bed of nettles, for the purpose of telling Miss Tredegar the abrupt termination of her dear sister's journey into the lake district.

"So unexpected, my dear," said she, when she had shaken hands with Hester, and

turned her several times round to make sure that she was indeed the veritable eldest daughter of Mr. Tredegar, and not a myth who was going to be married and go out to India—"so perfectly unexpected. Why, if anyone had told me that your respected papa himself contemplated changing his condition, it could not have given me a greater turn. And, indeed, not so much, for I'm sure it's often been suggested to my mind that a wife would be a pleasing addition to Mr. Tredegar's personal comforts; not that you don't do everything for him, my dear, that the most heavenly of daughters could do; but you see a wife is a sort of centre, and gives a finish to a house, just the same as a nicely arranged rosette or cluster of flowers sets off a bonnet; and if he *could* have met with a suitable finish,

something about his own age, though I don't know exactly what that may be, and with the blessing of health, so that she could accompany him in his long walks, it would be so delightful, you know, especially as things are at present, and your prospects so unexpected."

And that word "unexpected" seemed to bring Miss Lapiter back to the subject in hand, being the very word with which she started. So she left Mr. Tredegar's possibilities, and resumed those of his daughter.

"Altogether unexpected, and to Mr. Brayton, too. Though really I can't say why it shouldn't have entered my mind as a contingency upon his acquaintance with your dear papa, because he's a remarkably capable man—as much so as any one in Angusbury, and excellent in an emergency.

I'm sure I shall never forget how coolly he went off that unfortunate afternoon to harness Nancy, and myself in such a condition of flurry as I never experienced before nor since, without ever touching her nose, too, as I could tell by the look of her as soon as ever we got to the carriage; and he not accustomed to her either, such a flirtish little thing as she is, and steps splendidly—I mean the pony, my dear, though for that matter there isn't a pony anywhere that steps more splendidly than Mr. Brayton, and carries himself so uprightly, too, just like the sycamores in Milcote Lane for uprightness and steadiness, and so I hope it will turn out well, I do indeed; though, my dear, if you could have settled in Angusbury—if you *could* have settled in Angusbury, my dear Miss Hester."

And then little Miss Lapiter began to take off her gloves, with a view to being asked to stay tea, which she generally did when she came to Milcote.

"If it was quite convenient to you, my dear," she said, when the invitation had been given, and, without any pretence of hesitation, accepted; "that was just what I intended, and so I put my work in my pocket, not being likely to have many future opportunities of the kind, because you know, my dear, it wouldn't be exactly the thing for an unmarried lady of my age, and suitable, too, as regards position and that sort of thing, to come and take tea with your papa when there isn't a young lady in the family to excuse it; you know a young lady in a family is such a convenience, and, as I may say,

makes a centre before a wife comes. And that's the very thing that flashed into my mind first thing—though I'm sure you'll think it selfish of me—when Mrs. Basil Brooke came over to tell me of your prospects. 'There, now,' I said, 'I shall lose a place to go out to tea to.' And if you were a maiden lady of sixty-nine, dear Hester, which I'm thankful to say there is no danger of your being now, and living alone with no particular vocation, you would know what a resource it is to go out to tea sometimes in a quiet way, just muffins, and perhaps a sponge-cake, and two or three friends, with a view to conversation. It's an Elim in the desert, it is indeed; and I'm sure I'd rather go out to tea with a friend in a quiet way, with a view to conversation, than meet with

twelve wells and three-score and ten palm-trees, like the children of Israel. But then, of course, they couldn't go out to tea under the circumstances, for which I pity them, as I said to Joan last time we went through Exodus in our morning reading; forty years, and never to go out to tea in a quiet way, it's quite sad to think about. But then, as I remarked to Joan, perhaps they hadn't any maiden ladies amongst the children of Israel. Somehow I don't think the female population was so disproportionate in that part of the world and during that dispensation as it is in Angusbury at the present time."

Hester thought the same.

"And now, my dear, to come back to the original subject which is sticking up amongst all this, like Mount Ararat in the

midst of the flood, you have my best wishes, my very best wishes, though Mr. Brayton isn't the man I had selected for you myself, but that is as it is, and we can't make it different. I have no doubt, my dear, he will make you a good husband. And would you like to know why I think so?"

Of course Hester said she would. She had listened patiently enough and with a quiet smile to Miss Lapiter's innocent little stream of talk. Her own thoughts had been working on beneath it all the time, like the subject of a fugue, which holds its way steadily through variations and modulations, and comes to the surface at last, clear and distinct as ever. Thoughts of a future so closely knitted up with his; thoughts of a past on which she had learned to dwell

now without one tinge of bitterness, only a gentle regret which could do no one any harm, which made this love not less true and faithful.

"It is in this way, my dear," said Miss Lapiter, knitting away vigorously, "though I don't suppose anyone but myself would ever have found it out. I once had an experience myself. I daresay you're surprised to hear it, because I don't look much like that sort of thing at my time of life, but it's more than forty years ago, and I was different forty years ago to what I am now; no grey hairs sticking out behind, as that mischievous little sister of yours brought forward in the presence of your dear papa, to my inexpressible mortification, though of course I couldn't manifest anything of the kind, and I daresay he knew it *was* a front,

after all; but as I was going to say, I had an experience which unfortunately came to nothing, in consequence of the young gentleman's untimely death in the prime of life, which was a great trouble to me at the time, not having learned then, as I have learned since, that everything is providential, if we could only bring ourselves to look at it in that light. And you know, my dear, I was naturally anxious to ascertain his domestic habits, and if he stayed at home at nights, which I consider the foundation of all moral excellence whatsoever. If there's one thing more than another, my dear Hester, that I attach importance to on the part of a young man, it is staying at home at nights."

"And how did you find it out?" asked

Hester, who was not so fertile in expedients as her maiden friend.

"That's what I'm coming to, my dear, if only you don't interrupt me. Well, you know, poor dear Alfred lived in North Street, that nice quiet road that turns down from the Abbey; and in an evening, when it wasn't his turn to come to our house, I used to slip down into North Street, and by going on the opposite side of the road and standing on tip-toe, I could see through the fanlight at the top of the front door. That was enough for me. I never wanted anything more than that, never."

"But I don't understand how that could give you any insight into his domestic habits," said Hester.

"Don't you, my dear? Not when there

was a row of pegs just behind that fanlight, and his hat hanging upon one of them, night after night, with as much certainty as you might look for the Abbey clock over the west door? Dear Alfred's hat told me the whole story. You don't know what a comfort it was to me to see that hat hanging up there, night after night, for it told me that he was at home improving his mind, or being a comfort to his mother, or something of that sort. And since then I have always formed my opinion of young men by their hats being hung up behind the fanlight regularly of a night. And I don't doubt, my dear Hester, if you were to slip down to Lellandsbank to-night, or almost any night, you would find Mr. Brayton's hat hanging up behind the fanlight as specified, which is the founda-

tion of my satisfaction with respect to your prospects, though, as I said before, he is not the man I had fixed upon as most suitable for you."

"But supposing there should not be a fanlight, or a row of pegs," suggested Hester, who had never thought of this method of testing domesticated habits.

"Oh! well, my dear, circumstances would alter cases, then; but all the houses in Angusbury *have* fanlights and rows of pegs in the front passage; and if I were an architect, I would make it a point of conscience never to construct houses on any other principle, because it's so important to ascertain whether a young man spends his evenings at home. It's everything, my dear Hester, everything, when a young man spends his evenings at home."

And Miss Lapiter let her knitting drop, and began to rub her hands together, as if washing them. A sure sign that the depths of her emotional nature were being stirred.

"But to return to the subject, my dear," she continued, "and I'm sure I'm very much like the schoolboy who set off to go to school, but for every step he took he slipped back two, so at last he turned round and did it backwards altogether, by which means he got there in process of time, and I think that's the way I generally come to what I want to say. It did give me such a turn when I knew it was to be so soon; and an outfit, too, which makes it seem such a responsible thing. But of course you will go over with some suitable female friend and purchase that at Mills-

many; I would go with you myself with the greatest of pleasure, nothing but linen and silk, you know, my dear, and a blessing too, considering the high price of wool at the present time. And then Milcote turned inside out again, almost, as I may say, before it's had time to turn round and take its breath, and the milliners and dressmakers twisting you about as if you were nothing but a lay figure for dresses to be tried upon, to say nothing of the solemnities of the prospect of such a change in life; for as I've always said, marriage is a solemn thing, an exceedingly solemn thing, though I could never get your dear sister to view it in that light. But then, you see, with all respect to Mrs. Basil Brooke, and being your sister, I would never speak of her with anything but

respect, she was not a person that could look solemnly at anything. Now, was she, my dear Hester, a person that could be brought to look solemnly at anything?"

Hester was obliged to admit the truth of the statement. Mrs. Basil Brooke was *not* a person who looked solemnly at anything.

"No. I was sure you would say so, not even the furnishing of her house, which, if anything could awaken a sense of responsibility, ought to have that effect; and I don't believe she knows to this day whether the kitchen has any convenience for hanging bacon, or whether there is a well in the cellar for cheese, which, as I told her, is such an important thing for keeping it moist; and if there is one thing which Mr. Brooke likes more than another, it is a piece

of good cheese. I'm sure, when he boarded with me, his cheese used to be on my mind for days and days, thinking what sort I ought to choose for him, and how to keep it nice and moist when I did get it. But that is as it is, my dear, and we can't help it. And so soon as next November, too! Dear me!—why, it seems only like yesterday that Mrs. Brayton and I were sitting under that beech-tree at the Monk's Crag, talking over Mr. Brayton's future prospects, though without the slightest reference to yourself, my dear, on my part—nothing of the sort; and she said that if her son went abroad again, he would not go alone, meaning, of course, that he would marry, which was the most sensible thing that he could do, India being a genteel family residence—not like taking a lady to

live in the Sandwich Islands, or some of the other uninhabited parts of the earth, which, if I was a gentleman, I could never have the face to do, depriving her of civilised comforts, and a social cup of tea with a friend, and other providential mercies. But, I declare, there's Jane got the tea all arranged. How quiet that girl is, to be sure, and I never so much as knew that she was in the room!"

Neither did Hester, until Jane Fawcet, with her customary curtsey, asked:

"Please, Miss, shall I tell the master that tea is waiting?"

Yet she had been there nearly ten minutes, stealing silently about, listening to all that Miss Lapiter said, treasuring it up for future use. Then she went back to the kitchen, where Margaret sat, reading a good

book. Margaret was always reading good books when the work was done, unless she took up her sewing, and then she would sing a psalm-tune to keep it company. Jane liked that, for it kept Margaret from talking to her.

There was nothing to do in the house, so she began to walk up and down the little grassed yard in front of the kitchen door, thinking—thinking.

Nils Brayton's face was towards the sunlight now—hers was towards the gloom. There was no more sunlight for her; she knew that well enough. In the gloom that was about her now she would travel to the end. All that she wished was to turn his face into it as well. And this she would do, come what might.

CHAPTER XI.

BUT how? That was what knitted Jane Fawcet's brows day by day, and drew such a dark shadow over her face as she moved stealthily about the house, listening at half-open doors, catching up little stray scraps of conversation, watching every look and action which might help her in the arrangement of her plans.

All too quickly for her, who could as yet see no way of revenge, the days sped on. Already the keen winds of September were driving the leaves hither and thither in Milcote Lane. Already Margaret was

beginning to make arrangements for the change which would shortly take place in the quiet little household. Six weeks—scarcely so much as that—and Nils Brayton and Hester would be crossing the sea to that far-off land, where no curse of hers could reach them any more. And had she, then, waited so long in vain? Had she hungered and starved, and struggled through those ten weary years in London for nothing? Had she crushed down her pride, and worn a menial's garb, and borne that galling yoke of servitude, only that the Milcote people might have their kitchen work done, and their table duly attended, and their commands obeyed—nothing more than that? Was her poor life to be trodden out into darkness at last, its one purpose unaccomplished, whilst his went brightening on in

the sunshine which poured upon it now? Oh! that revenge would come!

And it did come at last.

Nils Brayton had well compared the Government under which he had the honour to serve, to that old Roman centurion, who said to one servant "go," to another "come," to a third "do this," and straightway the several mandates were fulfilled.

But he never thought the "go" would be uttered to himself with such startling abruptness as to break up all his cherished plans, and send him forth alone, companionless, to that distant land on whose unfamiliar shore he had hoped first to tread with Hester by his side. Hester, with whose love anywhere would be home.

Only a few days after that brief interview with Mr. Tredegar, in which he had

asked and obtained his consent to their marriage, Nils Brayton was summoned to London to join his company, which was under orders for immediate embarkation. No time for question or delay. There was his place, there he must be in it. And so it came to pass that scarce a week from the time when, standing under the jasmine-tree by Milcote porch, they two had promised to hold to each other always, they were standing there again, bidding farewell before the deep sea parted them, it might be for months, it might be for years, it might be for ever.

It was a quiet farewell, such as those may always say who have perfect faith in each other. Holding Hester's hands, looking down into her face, alone in the September night, Nils Brayton read there the stead-

fast trust which would bring her to him again, though oceans or deserts lay between them. What he was going to do for duty, she would not be slow to do, when the time came, for love, Knowing that, he could wait patiently. The athlete, who has run the race and reached the goal, does not stretch forth hasty hands to seize the wreath which he has won. It is his own, none can take it from him now; he can well be calm until the judge lays it on his brow. So calm was Nils Brayton, though none but himself knew the hopes which that untimely summons had put to flight. For what were three little months to the long years of joy which lay beyond them?

"You will come, Hester? You are not afraid?"

Hester smiled. What had she done that

she should fear? And what was even the deep sea to those whom neither life nor death could part, who belonged to each other, not for this world only, but the next?

"No. I am not afraid. I will come to you."

"Good-bye, my only one."

And then he was gone. She stood where he had left her, listening to the tramp of his footsteps down the lane across the high road; those strong, heavy, regular footsteps, which seemed as though they must crush everything beneath them—the footsteps which she would never hear again beneath the sycamore trees of Milcote Lane—never hear again until she had said good-bye to the old home and the old friends, and crossed that wide sea which holds so many graves.

Yet she shed no tear. She had known far bitterer pain than that little parting. It was when she listened to May's unconscious murmurings, last year at this time, that she felt what an unkind thing life may be. That was the valley and shadow of death; this, but a passing gloom, leading her into the light again. There was no need to mourn for this.

Miss Lapiter thought there was, though, when, on the strength of this second upheaval of her dear young friend's prospects, she came to take tea at Milcote with a view to conversation. Miss Lapiter never liked to hear of a wedding being put off, it was a bad sign. If it would not have been an unpleasant thing for dear Hester's feelings, she could have told her scores of instances in which weddings put off in that way had

blown over altogether; which was disappointing, because it was so much better in every way for young people to be settled, even though that settlement involved an outfit, and a sea voyage, and a home in a strange country, away from social cups of tea and other civilized blessings. And, though this wedding was not going to blow over—nothing of the sort—according to present prospects, only put off until such time as the needful arrangements could be made for Hester to undertake the voyage to Amherst, to which place Mr. Brayton was to come down from his station to meet her; yet Miss Lapiter could not deny that she had an uncomfortable feeling about it—a feeling as if something would happen before the ceremony was fairly accomplished, and dear Hester united in the holy bonds of matri-

mony to one who was in every way qualified to make her happy, although he *was* such a very great contrast to Mr. Brooke. But Mr. Brooke had fallen considerably in Miss Lapiter's estimation ever since he committed the unpardonable mistake of marrying May instead of her sister; and she began to think that perhaps, after all, Providence had made a better arrangement than her own, which had once seemed the very perfection of suitability. Only there was that going out to India alone. Miss Lapiter must confess she did not like that going out to India alone. But dear Hester took even that with such sweet composure, as she had taken everything lately.

"So wonderfully composed, my dear," said the good lady, when she had taken

off her things and settled down to conversation; "but it's just what might have been expected from you. I've said to myself over and over again, that ever since your sister's illness, you have had that amount of self-possession which even an earthquake couldn't discompose, to say nothing of having to go to India all alone by yourself, and the chance of sea-sickness and the vessel creaking and groaning, as I have heard vessels do creak and groan when they get away from home, and perhaps storms, and being wrecked on a desert island, or something of that sort. I should lose my senses, I am sure I should, and I told Joan so, if I were called upon in the order of Providence to undertake such a journey on my own responsibility. But I do believe, my dear, that if Jane Fawcet

were to come into the parlour and say, 'Please, Miss, the millennium is here,' you would say, 'Very well, Jane; it is quite right.'"

Jane *had* come into the parlour, but not to make any such announcement. She only brought a few coals to the fire, and then contrived to loiter about the room for a moment or two, as she generally did when Miss Lapiter was making a call at Milcote.

"Yes, my dear, it's wonderful what a maturing effect your sister's illness has had upon you, though I'm sure you didn't need it half so much as she did, and I can't see that it's altered her in the least, except to make her more of a butterfly than she was before. And no attention to housekeeping, or anything of that sort; you

must forgive me, my dear, for saying it, on account of her being your sister; but it goes to my heart, it does, that she should flutter through the responsibilities of life without even seeming to know that it has any, or proprieties, or anything of that sort. And the Government ought to be ashamed of itself, and I told Mrs. Brayton so, to separate lovers and friends in that way, just as if the corps couldn't have gone without him, and he just on the point of having his happiness consummated, as indeed I hope it will be before long, only, Hester, my dear, I *should* have liked to have seen you married, and tasted the bride-cake from your own hands, and given you my best wishes, and stationed myself at the front door whilst you took your seat in the carriage like a Christian bride,

amid tears, and smiles, and farewells, the same as when Mrs. Basil went in that love of a black flounced silk to the southern coast, and the sweetest of tulle bonnets with pink roses inside. If it *could* have been arranged in that way, my dear."

And again Miss Lapiter began to rub her hands, as she always did when under the influence of emotion. She had so set her heart on seeing dear Hester married, and possibly presiding at the wedding breakfast, having known the family so long, and there being no "centre" to the establishment, in the shape of a Mrs. Tredegar, to whom that office would naturally have fallen. Miss Lapiter wondered whether Mr. Tredegar would provide himself with a centre when Hester was gone. Milcote would certainly need something by

way of finish then, and if Mr. Tredegar could meet with some one suitable as to age, and position, and companionable qualities, and with a nice talent for conversation, seeing he was so deficient in that department, his happiness would be so very much improved, to say nothing of the pleasing addition which a wife such as she pictured to herself would be to the general domestic comfort. Miss Lapiter thought that really on the whole Mr. Tredegar could not do better than marry.

"If it could have been so, my dear, that Providence had permitted you to quit the bosom of your family an actual bride, instead of having it to look forward to, which is not so satisfactory. And now, I suppose, it will take place at Amherst, where there isn't a creature to dress you, on the event-

ful morning, and arrange the folds behind, and throw your veil gracefuly over, and see that the wreath sits as it ought to sit, and attend to the particulars. Unless, my dear," —and here Miss Lapiter, who had appeared somewhat cast-down by the gloomy prospect which her imagination conjured up, suddenly brightened as if a new light had dawned upon her—"unless, my dear, you were to take out a female attendant in the shape of a trustworthy single person, who would be a comfort to you during the voyage, and act as lady's-maid when you are settled in your new home. And now I come to think of it, my dear, a female attendant seems to be just the very thing for you to take out—something, you know, for you to fall back upon; and accustomed to English ways and domestic habits, which,

I'm sure, the Hindoos are not, though I don't look upon them in the light of commonplace heathens; no, nor ever did since the last Missionary meeting, two years ago, when that dear minister from Millsmany, who had spent half his lifetime in labouring amongst them, gave us such a sweetly pretty account of the manners and customs; but still not English, my dear, so that a female attendant would be a comfort; and I do hope you will take it into consideration, and speak to your dear papa about it. And so, you see, in the end, things may not be so dark as we anticipated, which is generally the case, and you have my best wishes—my very best wishes—for a prosperous voyage, and a blissful meeting with the object of your affections; although it *is* a serious undertaking, my dear—a voyage to

India on your own responsibility. And as for bridesmaids, where they are to come from is a question which lies as heavy on my mind as the choosing of Mr. Brooke's Stilton, when he used to reside with me, unless there happen to be some young ladies on board, who would be willing to act in that capacity; and I do hope and trust it will be the case, for what is a wedding without bridesmaids, my dear? Almost as insipid as salmon without cucumber, or an egg without salt. You really must hunt up some bridesmaids somehow. Oh, dear, dear! it is a serious responsibility, this voyage to India, before the ceremony takes place."

Yes, it was. Hester did not need to be reminded of that, though looking at the subject in a different light from that in which it commended itself to Miss Lapiter's con-

sideration. But she need not fear; the deep sea would give her rest. Those words might not be such an idle tale, as when, a year ago, she listened to them under the reddening mountain ash tree by the hermit's cell.

CHAPTER XII.

JANE FAWCET was loitering in the parlour when that bright thought struck Miss Lapiter. She contrived some excuse for remaining there until the loquacious little lady, having dwelt at considerable length on the desirability of a female attendant, drifted away into a fresh subject. Then she went back to the kitchen and sat in the open doorway, watching the dry fallen leaves that danced about so merrily as the September wind played with them in the little grassed yard at that side of the house. It had been a favourite occupation of Jane's for

some weeks past to stand at the open door and watch those leaves careering about. It was a babyish sort of amusement, Margaret thought; and she wondered how a woman of Jane Fawcet's age and capability could spend so much time in it. But as the good old Milcote housekeeper, who was of a charitable spirit, said to herself,

"She don't never do it only when the work is through, so I don't say nothing. And it lies strong upon my mind as it's a season of meditation with her. Some folks meditates one way, and some another. It's my case as I'm most drawn out sitting afore the kitchen-fire with my eyes shut. I gets many a blessed season then, studying on speritle matters; but I won't say as she mayn't be visited similar the same as she stands there with such a dead sort o' look.

It may be a token, folks can't tell. Leastways, I don't go to say nothing."

When bedtime came, Margaret read the usual evening portion and commented upon it, after her simple, earnest manner; but Jane's thoughts were far enough from any words which might reach her ear. That chance remark of Miss Lapiter's had led her into a new tract of scheming. It had shed a little light over a future in which, until now, there had seemed faint hope of working out her long-cherished plan of revenge. For hours that night, after the rest of the Milcote people were fast asleep, she sat up in her own room, with folded arms and resolutely knitted brows, shaping out to herself some definite plan of action. And once shaped out, she was not slow to act upon it. The opportunity of doing this

presented itself not many days after Nils Brayton's hasty departure.

Hester was again sitting in the broad, low window-seat, looking out into the garden, across which alternate sweeps of shine and shadow lay, just as they had lain a month ago, when his heavy footfall was heard upon the path. Only that now the last of the roses had faded, and the yellow leaves lay thickly strewn among the daisies, and only a few jasmine flowers peeped out here and there, like stars when morning is near.

Was it soon to be morning with her? Was she thinking of Nils Brayton now? Perhaps so, for there was a deepening smile upon her face; not the sparkle of joy which used to light up May's when she sat there, watching for Basil Brooke; nor the flush of

eager expectation which kindled upon her own, when, in that long ago time she waited for the half-hour chime which told her it was time to set off to the School of Art, whence she always returned, only to wish the hours away until that drawing-class came round again. This was the smile of trust, quiet, contented trust. Was not this better? Would it not be always better?

The bells of Milcote Church were ringing a muffled peal. The old clergyman was dead. He had been buried that morning. The clergyman who had married May; who was to have married her too, if things had not changed so suddenly. Miss Lapiter said that was another unpleasant thing; the wedding put off, the clergyman dead who was to have officiated at it. But then Miss Lapiter was rather superstitious. It was not

always advisable to put implicit confidence in Miss Lapiter's impressions.

The evening was so still, so calm, that Hester could hear every tone of that peal quite distinctly; the clear, ringing, seven-voiced chime, then the low, muffled, murmuring response. They seemed to her like the voices of the present and the past; the clear chime of the actual life, the dim, veiled response of the days that were no more. This for Hope, that for Memory. Or was it that the joy-song of the merry bells was for that little year in which she had loved and lost; and the low, whispering tones that followed it, for this life, out of which joy had gone that content might enter.

And still she listened, and still the bells kept chiming and changing, for Hope and

Memory, for Memory and Hope, for the glory that had gone, for the rest that had come.

There was a timid knock at the door, and Jane Fawcet came in, curtseying low.

"If you please, Miss, there was something I wanted to speak to you about, if you are not engaged."

With an effort Hester broke away from her reverie. Yes, she could listen. Doubtless Jane was thinking about changing her situation. She had been long enough now to obtain a good character, and perhaps she wished to "better herself," as the phrase goes. Margaret said the girl had been rather unsettled of late, as if she had something on her mind.

"I hope, Miss, you won't be offended

with me when I tell you that I know about your going away abroad soon. Margaret told me there was going to be a change, and I thought I would like to speak to you about it, at such time as might be convenient to you."

A faint flush passed across Hester's face, or it might be only the red sunset giving her cheek a deeper colour. For that latticed casement looked towards the west, and in September evening-time, when the sycamore-trees were bare, a warm glow poured through it, flooding the dim little room as with light from a cathedral window.

"Yes, Jane, you are quite right to mention it, and I expect you will wish for another place. I will do what I can to get you one that will be comfortable, for you have served us very faithfully. I am

sure you have done your duty whilst you have been at Milcote."

Jane curtseyed again, but there was no smile of gratified pride on those thin white lips.

"You are very kind, Miss, to say so; but that isn't what I was going to mention to you. I wouldn't wish to leave Milcote for any other situation, if it hadn't been for the change that Margaret told me was going to be made. And she said, too, Miss, that you had some thoughts of taking a person out with you to attend upon you, but she wasn't quite sure about it, and that's what I wanted to take the liberty of mentioning, if you had not fixed upon any one."

Hester said that she had not. And as she said that, a gleam of brightness came into Jane Fawcet's eyes.

"Because, Miss, I came in to say that if you hadn't sought after anyone, I would be willing and thankful to go with you, and I would do the best I could to serve you and be a comfort to you, same as I have done since I came to Milcote. And I'm not a person, as you know, Miss, that isn't willing to be put into the right way, though I haven't been a waiting-maid before; and I don't doubt but I could suit you, after I got to know how you like things done about you."

That was a new idea. Hester had considered Miss Lapiter's suggestion that she should take out some trusty person with her on her voyage, and she had determined to act upon that suggestion, but she had never thought of Jane Fawcet as likely to undertake the situation. Yet, now that the

girl had mentioned it herself, it seemed almost strange that the idea had not struck her before. For Jane was so quiet and unassuming and respectful. She had none of the usual vulgarities of her class; there was no coarseness, either in her speech or manner, no rude provincial awkwardness like that which had so marred Sally's otherwise valuable qualifications. And then she was so watchful and observant, so ready to anticipate the slightest want; indeed almost needlessly attentive, and so scrupulous in all her parlour duties. Perhaps it would be difficult to find anyone who combined so many of the qualities requisite in the situation she offered to take. But Hester would not have her enter upon it without forethought. The girl was willing and dutiful, but she had not the sweetest of

dispositions, and if she chanced to be disappointed in the work she had undertaken, that humility of hers might degenerate into sullenness, and that silent reserve into gloom or discontent.

"It would be a serious change for you, Jane; have you consulted with your friends about it?"

"I haven't any friends, Miss Hester, to consult, and that's partly why I would be willing to go. I'm not a person that ever made acquaintance. I came a stranger to Angusbury, and I don't know anybody in it; and there's nobody either in England, me being a lonely woman, as I am, that I should care to leave. And it isn't a sudden thought, Miss Hester, for since Margaret told me you would take someone with you, I've turned it over in my mind, and it

always seemed that it would be suitable for me to go, having no home here nor no one to miss me. For there's no one, Miss Hester, that I have any duties to, more than yourself, who have been kind to me ever since I came to Milcote; and as I said before, if you took me I would serve you the best I could."

Hester said she would think about it, and promised Jane an answer in the course of a few days, after she had consulted with her friends.

Mr. Tredegar thought it would be a very suitable arrangement. So did Mrs. Brayton, and Miss Lapiter gave the scheme her most unqualified approbation.

"It's providential, my dear Hester," said the estimable spinster, when called upon to give her opinion—"nothing else but provi-

dential, as, indeed, everything has been, connected with Jane Fawcet coming into your family. I said from the very beginning that she was marked out for you, and for no one else. And so neat and well-behaved, and knows what belongs to her position as there's not a girl in five hundred knows it, and as even-tempered and quiet as an Arabian camel—indeed more so, for I've heard they complain very much when anything is given them to do, and that's what you never have to say against Jane Fawcet. Yes, my dear, it's the very thing you have to do, is to take Jane Fawcet and be thankful for her. And if there's one thing more than another would reconcile me to the voyage, which you know, my dear, didn't recommend itself to me as providential at first, but

rather the reverse, it is your being settled with a person you can trust, and who will be such a comfort to you, and give an eye to your being dressed properly on the eventful morning, and your veil right, and all that sort of thing. And now there's only the bridesmaids that lie at all heavy upon my mind, and doubtless they will be provided at the right time, so that everything will be for the best, as I always say it is, if only we could bring ourselves to look at it in that light. Yes, my dear, it's providential, that's just what it is—providential."

So in the course of a day or two, Jane was summoned into the parlour, and told that she might prepare for the voyage to India.

CHAPTER XIII.

JANE FAWCET curtseyed and went back into the kitchen where, the time being towards the close of the day, Margaret sat as usual by the fire with her sewing work, accompanying it with a hymn tune, which was interrupted now and then that she might more conveniently attend to the stirring of syrup for preserved apricots. The apricots were for Miss Hester to take on board with her, to remind her of her old home, in a manner. There was nothing, Margaret said, that reminded *her* of her dear father and mother so much as boiled

turnips with pepper to them. When she was a little girl at home, they had boiled turnips three times a week, with pepper to them, on account of being a cheap vegetable. And her father was so fond of them, that he never used to ask a blessing on anything so heartily as boiled turnips with pepper to them, because he said they were one of the Almighty's best gifts. And though that was more than fifty years ago, she never set eyes on a dish of boiled turnips now, without thinking of the old home and dear father with his drab coat and spectacles, and the little kitchen that always looked so light and clean with the flitches of bacon and bags of pot-herbs hanging from the middle beam; and the Tom Thumb geraniums in the window, that never used to be meddled with except on a Sunday

morning, when, just before her father set off to chapel, she was allowed to gather one and put it in his button-hole; and then, stretching up her little hand to reach his, they all went across the fields together to the meeting-house under the elm trees on the left-hand side of the green.

That was the picture which rose before Margaret's eyes whenever she saw boiled turnips with pepper to them. And she thought the apricots would be something of the kind to Miss Hester; for if there was one thing more than another which Mr. Tredegar cared to have upon the table, it was apricots, on account of their growing in that island across the sea where the Missis was buried. And she thought when Miss Hester was on board ship far away from

Milcote, with its sycamore trees and cluster roses, amongst strange faces and strange ways, and never a one to speak to her of the old home and the friends she had loved there, she might happen to look at the apricots, and think of the south wall where they grew, and the lilies that bloomed under that wall, and the grassy path beside it where Mr. Tredegar used to pace up and down in the sunshine, and where Nils Brayton had stood when he turned to look his last upon her before he went away. That was why the Milcote housekeeper spent so much thought and care over that syrup; that was why she had just hushed her hymn tune to attend to it, when Jane Fawcet came back to the kitchen.

"It's settled, Margaret. I'm to go to India with Miss Hester."

"Well, honey, I hope it's for good. I've been much led out in prayer for you of late that you might be directed in the right path, and I don't misdoubt but what it's a leading of Providence, both for you and Miss Hester. Maybe the Lord has a work for you to do, as he's taking you so far away from your country and kindred into the midst of a people of strange speech."

"Very likely," said Jane quietly. "At any rate, I've had my mind set upon it since Miss Hester spoke about some one going out with her. It would be a lonesome journey for her by herself. And then you see, I can help her with her things when the time comes to land."

Margaret smiled as she skimmed the syrup for her apricots."

"You'll none need to do that, honey.

Mr. Brayton won't let nobody do that for her but himself. As soon as they hear tell of the ship, he'll take a boat and come right away to meet it. You don't suppose he'll bide patiently on land when there's a chance of getting speech of her half a day sooner with just getting a boat and going after the ship. You'll see if he isn't aboard of her as soon as ever she comes nigh-hand the shore—ay, and a shame if he isn't, too, and dear Miss Hester gone all that way just for love of him."

A dull red gleam flashed from beneath Jane Fawcet's heavy eyelids, but she said nothing and Margaret went on.

"I've seed a good deal of that sort o' thing, coming and going in my time, though I don't suppose I should never have thought of it no more, if you hadn't happened to

bring it up, cause of it's being so far back, better nor forty year ago, as near as I can tell. It was when I was a girl, and first went out to place, and my Missis and her daughter was ordered away somewheres across the sea. Madery, I think it was, but I don't remember exact; leastways, we was long enough getting there, what with contrary winds, and sea-sickness, and sometimes no wind at all, maybe; and you see, being a usefullish sort of girl, for my mother always brought us up handy, they had me along with them for a sort of waiting-maid. It was the young lady's health as she was ordered away for, and loth enough she was to go, for she left a young gentleman behind as she was promised to marry, and how she did fret, to be sure, for weeks and weeks, while her Ma almost rued she'd ever

had her away from him. You and me don't know much of that sort o' thing, Jane, but it's hard lines having the wide ocean betwixt you and those you love."

"I should say it is," answered Jane. "It's a thing I shouldn't like—no, nor wouldn't have either, if anybody put it on *me*."

"Whisht, honey!" and Margaret left her work to skim the apricots again. "Folks is obliged to have a vast o' things in this here world, let alone liking 'em or not. It isn't for us to say what we'll have, but to take what's given us, and if it isn't according to our choosings, to shut our mouths and take it quietly, same as little childer when their mothers gives 'em a drink of bitter medicine. It's got to be took, and sooner and better. But as I was

saying, we went to this here place—Madery, if that was it—and we stopped there a good bit, over six months, for the young lady didn't mend so fast as her Ma looked for, poor thing! I misdoubt, after all, whether the face of him she loved wouldn't ha' been a quicker medicine, and better to take than what the doctors called a change o' climate."

"Well, well," said Jane, impatiently, "you needn't talk so much about that, as we don't know anything about it. We haven't got the sea between us and anybody we love."

"Thank goodness, no, honey, and I hope we never shall—leastways, yourself; my time's past for that sort o' thing. Well, we got there, as I was a-saying, and a nice place enough it was for a change, though I

shouldn't have mattered it for nothing else. It was over warm, and the long sunshiny days, with never a bit o' keen fresh wind, such as we get over the moors in this country, seemed to make the folks limp and speritless, so as they couldn't do nought but idle about, and lie on sofys, and that sort o' thing, which made me at last, while I hadn't patience to see 'em. Nothing but soft winds don't do for the body, no more than always prosperity does for the soul; and I'm thinking that there Madery's a sort o' land o' Goshen, good and pleasant for a bit, but none the place to rear up a stout, hearty body, and God Almighty says to the folks there, same as he says to his own childer when their hearts is getting set upon carnal comforts, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son.' We want a bit of

an east wind sometimes, honey, both nat'ral and speritle, to keep us along brisk and hearty."

"Perhaps you are right," said Jane. "But some people get nothing but east wind."

"Ay, honey, that was Ephraim's case, as we read about in the Scripters. He fed on the wind, and followed after the east wind; but why?—why, because a deceived heart had turned him aside, and when folks takes to wrong courses, they needn't look for nothing but what's contrary. Ay, and it'll be all east wind, too, for there's no blessed summer-time for them to look forrards to, as turns aside to lies and wickedness. But, however, that's neither here nor there to what I was going to tell you, and it's strange how we get drawn out into speritle matters even when we seem to be

agate with nought but the things of time and sense. Well, the young lady picked herself up after a bit, and the doctor gived his word as she might be took home. So we come back again, and the young gentleman were at the port to meet us, and as soon as he got word of the ship, he took a boat and came aboard of her. And glad enough he was, I don't doubt, for almost as soon as he'd gotten on, the wind turned awk'ard, and we was beat about that far, that we was a matter of two or three days afore we could make the port again, and that would ha' been a dreary time for 'em both, poor things, if they'd been waiting for each other all along. And I don't misdoubt but what Mr. Brayton'll be just the same anxious to get sight of his young lady."

"But bless us, Jane!" and Margaret started as she looked up from her work, "what a face you've gotten! I've never seed such a face sin' that night when you come back from Lellandsbank, and gived me such a fright. That's a bad trick you've got of pulling faces. Anybody as didn't know you, might be sent into fits along of 'em."

Jane turned it off with a light laugh, just as she had done before.

"I only did it to frighten you, Margaret. I like to frighten people now and then, just for a change, you know. Mother used to say she never knew the like of me for making faces, whenever the thought took me. Never mind, I won't do it again."

"That's right, honey, don't. It's neither

good for them as does it, nor them as sees it, isn't a face like that there."

And truly if an ugly thought writes itself unawares in an ugly face, Margaret might well be startled; for never did an uglier thought fall into any human heart than that which Jane Fawcet opened hers to receive as she sat there so quietly, listening to the housekeeper's story. But Jane was accustomed to ugly thoughts now. She had welcomed them so often, and brooded over them so willingly, that they were no longer strange.

And at night, up in her own room, she shaped this one clearly out to herself. At last she could see to the end of that crooked tangled path, and a fearful sight it was that she looked upon. But what did she care for death? And what was

life to her, when its one dark purpose of revenge was accomplished? Could she come back any more to light and joy; could any future restore to her the years which Nils Brayton had destroyed? No; when her work was done, she would die. All would be over then. The grave would cover up everything. Her life was worth little enough. She need not fear to lose it.

CHAPTER XIV.

JANE FAWCET brightened up wonderfully after that affair was once decided about her going out to India with Miss Hester. Margaret said such a change had come over the girl that she could scarcely be known for the same. She never stood in the open doorway now, with folded arms, and dark frowning face, watching the dead leaves drift to and fro. She did her work with new spirit. She never seemed tired of talking about the voyage, and what a comfort she would be to Miss Hester, and how she might perhaps make a woman

of herself when she got out there, for English people were much thought of in India; they could get almost any wages that they chose to ask. It was a famous place, was India, Ruth Bennet said so, for people to get on.

Not that she meant to leave Miss Hester, nothing of the sort. She was never a person that cared for change. She would stay by her mistress until she died, yes, that she would. And as Jane Fawcet said that, she set her teeth together, and smiled a steady, resolute smile. She would stay by her mistress until she died. But Ruth Bennet had told her that going out to India was a wonderful thing for Nils Brayton. He wouldn't be pinched for money there, as he had sometimes been in England, for Government gave grand salaries

when it sent people abroad, to make up, Ruth Bennet supposed, for leaving their friends and giving up their homes, which of course they had a right to be paid for. And though Jane had no friends to leave, and no home to give up, yet it was nothing but just that she should share in the prosperity of her employers, and she was sure, too, that Miss Tredegar would let her share in it; for if there ever was a mistress that gave to her servants all that was proper, that mistress was Miss Tredegar. And as she had done at home, so she would do abroad, though that was not the reason Jane had offered to go with her, and take the long dangerous voyage, and brave an unhealthy climate and everything else that people had to brave when they went to India. Nothing but respect for Miss Trede-

gar had induced Jane to do that, she was thankful to say.

So the Milcote servant used to tell Margaret as she went about her work with such wonderful spring and energy, quite a new person, as Margaret said, and so improved in her temper from what she was six weeks ago. Indeed, the good old housekeeper thought that Jane's altered disposition could be nothing less than a "token for good," a kind of first fruits of that change of heart for which she had been hoping and praying ever since the girl came to the place. And Margaret gave thanks accordingly, and entreated that the blessed work might go on unto perfection. She had had it much laid upon her mind of late that Jane had a purpose to fulfil in thus casting herself upon the mighty deep and going forth

among a people of strange speech, a people, moreover, sunk in darkness and the shadow of death; and it might be a dawning of this in her own heart that was beginning to work upon the girl and rouse her from the listless, machine-like unconcern with which she had hitherto gone about her duties.

But that was not what Jane Fawcet said to herself, night after night, up in that little room of hers, leaning on the latticed casement and looking forth into the autumn gloom. Quite other thoughts and purposes had to be considered then, thoughts and purposes which darkened her face, and knitted her brow, and stiffened into such rigid lines those thin, colourless lips.

Ah! it was all plain now. Ere long Nils Brayton should find himself in a gloom, dark as any through which he had caused

her life to pass. She had waited long, but her time had come at last.

Not many evenings after the Indian scheme was finally determined upon, she asked leave to go into Angusbury, and returned with a great parcel under her arm.

"These are for going abroad," she said, as she laid it on the table. "Plain things."

"Ay, honey," Margaret replied, "I reckon you'll stand in need of a good lot of plain things out there. It's well for you cotton's cheap just now, or your wage wouldn't have gone far towards a bundle like that. You might have told me, and I would ha' framed to go with you, while Sally Bilson comed to mind the house. I always had a good eye for a bit o' calico, and I could ha' telled you, maybe, when you was making a good bargain for yourself."

Jane laughed a bitter laugh, a very bitter laugh.

"Thank you, Margaret, but I've as good an eye for a bit of cotton as anyone, and know the price it ought to be, too. I haven't stiched ten years for that shop in London without knowing good calico when I see it. I've had more to do with it in my time than ever you're likely to have."

"You're in the right of it, Jane. I'd forgot that you'd worked for that there place afore you come here; but you might let me see it, all the same."

"It's nothing to see," answered Jane, without offering to open the parcel; "stuff for plain things. Folks can see enough of that any day."

"Maybe they can, but I might give you

a hand towards cutting out and sewing of it. I'm a good sewer, though I say it myself, for that matter. I never see a bit o' work turned out of no shop yet that I couldn't better, except it was machines had done it, and it stands to reason human natur can't go again a machine. I'll help you, and welcome, if you've a mind to."

"Thank you, Margaret," and again Jane laughed that bitter laugh. "I got them ready-made. I've plain sewed enough in my time, and I don't want any more of that sort of thing. I only hope the poor wretch that made them got more than ever anybody gave me. It passes my understanding why ladies who give guineas and guineas for outside things, haggle for a penny or two pence with sewing women, as I've known them do when I took in plain work.

Ay! and Angusbury ladies, too! It's a starving place, is Angusbury, for plain sewing. They say they can get it done cheap at the 'parties,' and so they wont give a proper price. 'Parties' are as bad as machines for the poor sewing women. But I've done with it now. Talk about east wind, Margaret, you don't know what east wind is till you've tried to keep body and soul together with your needle and thread. Good night, I'm going to bed."

"Then you can shew me the things another time," said Margaret, who had a woman's love for shopping and looking at bargains.

"Yes, another time. I'm tired to-night. It's pretty well been too much for me, carrying that parcel all the way from Angusbury. I didn't think calico had been

so heavy. You see, when I worked for the shop in London, we just fetched and took it as we wanted, two or three things at a time, so that they were never to call a great weight. And well, too; for a sewing-woman hasn't much strength to put out in fetching and carrying. Good night again."

"Good night, honey, and a sweet night's rest to you."

Jane went to her own room, bolted the door after her, and shook herself impatiently, as she always did when she was safely alone, as though to shake off that disguise of humility and deference, which, in the presence of other people, she was obliged to wear so carefully. Then she opened the parcel which Margaret had been so anxious to investigate.

There were no "plain things" in it;

only a black dress of some soft lustrous material, and a large scarlet shawl; both, as Margaret would have said, had Jane shown them to her, very viewly to look upon, but much more suitable for a mistress than for her maid.

Margaret had no notion of servants aping their betters in that way. It was disrespectful, to say nothing of the evils to which such a fondness for display might lead. And Jane did well to keep her fine purchases to herself. If she spent the money which her mistress advanced for her outfit in that way, where were the plain things to come from? Margaret would say; and though shiny black dresses and scarlet shawls were all very well for people who had purses equal to their pride, they were a poor substitute for piles of well sewed

calico, and useful gowns, warranted to wash and wear, and respectable, servant-like aprons, and neat caps, such as Jane had always had the sense to put on since she came to Milcote. Margaret would have been sorely tried by that scarlet shawl. It would greatly have abated her thanksgiving for the change of heart which she hoped was being wrought in her fellow-servant; nay, it would have stamped Jane as being entirely given over to vanity and the lusts of the flesh; for if there was one thing more than another which Margaret looked upon as a token of a carnal and worldly mind, it was a love of outward adornment. And hitherto Jane had been a vessel of grace in that particular; so humble and modest, not given in the least to braided hair, and putting on of apparel, but rather adorning her-

self with a meek and quiet spirit, though not always with the best possible of tempers, especially about the time just before it was settled that she should go out to India with her mistress. Yes, Margaret would have been exercised about that shawl, without a doubt.

Jane Fawcet took off her lilac print gown, and put on the black dress; then she threw the shawl over her shoulders, and flinging off the close white cap, which she wore when about her work, let her black hair fall down in long, rippling masses. Even yet, so long as you did not look at her face, Jane was a fine woman; for with her servant-like dress she had also cast the servant-like slouch which belonged to it; and now, gathering the heavy folds of the shawl over her arm, she stood before the

glass in that little room with a lofty, upright mien, which a duchess might have envied, but could not have surpassed.

After regarding herself in the glass for a few moments, but with no pleased flush of pride or vanity to find herself so graceful, she unlocked the box where she kept that miniature portrait, and took out of it a gold ring, set with turquoise—the only valuable, excepting the portrait, which, during those ten long starving years, she had not been forced to sell for bread.

"The blue, that's for truth," she said to herself, as she turned the jewel over and over. "And I have been true; yes, very true. And the forget-me-not, that's for remembrance. He said so when he gave it to me under the jasmine tree. And I have not forgotten, neither shall he."

She tried to put the ring on, but could not. Her hands, once so white and slender, were rough now with household work, and appeared rougher still by the side of the delicate turquoise flower.

"Never mind," she muttered to herself. "They will improve on the voyage. No blackleading or scouring there. And I could fast a little, if that would make them smaller. Fasting is no new thing to me. It's a pity I wasn't brought up a Roman Catholic, for I've kept plenty of Lents in my time, as strictly as the best of them. Four months, perhaps five, if the winds are contrary—long enough that, to make a lady of me again, almost as graceful a lady as I was when he danced with me at the governor's ball. Patience, then; waiting is long, but revenge is sweet—yes, it is very sweet."

And with that, Jane Fawcet took off her finery and wrapped it carefully up, and then put the ring back again into the case, until next time she should need to wear it.

"When the voyage is over," she said to herself.

CHAPTER XV.

A FEW more weeks of hurry and preparation—a few—a very few farewell calls amongst the stately widows and elderly maiden ladies of the old town; a quiet ramble through the School of Art one afternoon when neither master nor pupils were there; ten minutes within that curtained recess where her easel caught the afternoon sunlight pouring down through the mullioned window; a motherly caress from Mrs. Brayton; a shower of kisses from May; a mingled tide of sobs, smiles and tears from combustible little Miss Lapiter, and Hester's

Angusbury life—the life in which she had hoped and suffered and enjoyed so much, was a thing of the past.

Mrs. Basil Brooke bore the parting with considerable equanimity. She had never more than a given amount of emotion to expand upon anything, and one or two other events happening about the same time, drew off the current of her feelings into side channels, thereby preventing it from overflowing to any serious extent, as it might have done, if all directed into one stream. Her husband's mother and sister were coming to Milcote for the first time since his marriage, which visit of course involved a considerable amount of preparation on the part of the young wife, who was anxious that both herself and her home should appear to advantage. Then she was changing her ser-

vants, an event of frequent occurrence at Ivy Dell, and one which could not take place without causing a temporary whirlpool in that little gem of a home. And finally, Basil had bought her a beautiful new piano, which was sent home the very day that dear sister Hettie left Angusbury, the most perfect love of a piano, just what she had been wishing for ever since she was married, with sea-green silk in front to match the drawing-room suite, and crystal holders for wax lights, and a walnut music-stool and Canterbury, all complete. Such a dear, good Basil as he was, and so thoughtful to get it for her when he knew she would be in trouble about sister Hettie going away. It would be very ungrateful of her to let him see her in tears after such a present as that; and so May did not let

him see her in tears, though whether it was the piano, or the change of servants, or the expected mother-in-law, or May's natural flow of spirits which enabled her to hold up so wonderfully to the very last, is needless to inquire into.

Basil Brooke was getting on well in his profession. When not engaged at the School of Art, his time was fully occupied in portrait painting, which was more profitable and also pleasanter, as it took him into society, and Mr. Brooke was a man who enjoyed society as much as he graced it. To see him in a crowded drawing-room, all smiles, and flattery, and compliments, or in his artistically disordered studio at Ivy Dell, chatting away so brilliantly to some plump beauty, whose fair pink and white features he was transferring to canvas, with additions

and improvements from his own imagination, you would say that Basil Brooke was just the man for a popular artist. He knew how to raise the flush of gratified vanity by some well-timed word of admiration; how to heighten the dullest eye by praise of fancied beauty; how to tone down defects and brighten charms, and transform even the stiff old maiden ladies and fast-fading antiques of Angusbury, into pictures of which people said, when they were framed and hung up in judicious lights,—

"How charming! Such an excellent likeness! But you are so clever, Mr. Brooke! Everyone says you are the cleverest artist we ever had in Angusbury."

And then Mr. Brooke would bow very low, and say he only regretted that he could not do more justice to the lovely

original; but the highest style of beauty consisted in that fine, subtle expression which it was impossible for any artist to reproduce. Nicely-chiselled features and a pretty complexion were every-day excellencies, "but the charm of expression, you know," and Mr. Brooke looked at the severely dignified maiden lady in flowing moire antique and gold ornaments, or the faded antique, whose bony neck and square shoulders were hidden by vapourous clouds of tulle.

"Expression, as every true artist says, is the supreme beauty. Expression never dies."

Then of course fresh orders used to come in; for people who had neither nicely-chiselled features nor faultless complexions, took it for granted that they possessed the supreme beauty of expression, which was so much better, as every true artist said. Expression

never grew old, there was nothing so beautiful as expression.

Meanwhile little May, the five months' bride, who had lost none of her sweet spring loveliness, sat among the *papier-maché* furniture and Swiss muslin curtains, and water-colour pictures, as much like a May-blossom as ever, sometimes arranging leaves in the silver-netted vases, sometimes singing a song, sometimes making a few paper roses and azalias, sometimes flashing her golden curls into the kitchen for five minutes, sometimes throwing a white table-cloth round her by way of drapery, and sitting to Basil for Flora or Hebe, or one of the three Graces.

And if the buttons were not always where a thrifty wife would have put them, and if the puddings were anything but light, and

the fowls by no means so youthful and beautiful and tempting as the sweet little lady who had ordered them, and if Ivy Dell never knew to a couple of hours when it was going to have its dinner, and if the stock of tea "went out" unexpectedly, and the coffee was nowhere when Basil wanted his breakfast, May made up for all these trifles by her bright smiles and winning ways, which were a thousand times better, Basil said, than all the breakfasts and dinners and buttons in the world. Miss Lapiter hoped he would always think so, but she wasn't quite sure about it. Men had a natural, deeply-rooted affection for buttons and personal comforts, which could never be overcome, except for a very little season, by bright smiles and winning ways. May must take care, or somebody that Miss

Lapiter could mention would wish himself back again even yet in furnished lodgings before the six months were over.

So, one dull November day, when leaves and flowers and sunshine seemed almost as much things of the past as her own girl-life, Hester said good-bye to Angusbury. Sadly, as people look upon old familiar objects which they shall see no more again for ever, she strained her eyes for a farewell glimpse of the old Abbey towers, and the mullioned window of the School of Art, and the black outline of the Monk's Crag, looming up amidst leafless woods upon the grey, wintry sky. Then in the distance, Milcote's red gables peered once more through the sycamore branches; then for a moment the white front of Lellandsbank glistened among the trees. After that, all

was strange, new and strange, as everything would be now for long months to come. Then, for the first time, Hester felt how much she had loved the old place; how deeply it had rooted itself in a heart that was ever slow to forget.

Jane Fawcet, sitting in the next carriage, strained her eyes for no farewell glimpse. Angusbury had given her little joy, she could leave it with little regret. Only, as she leaned back in the comfortable second-class carriage of the London express and showed her ticket to the guard, who came with a polite "Tickets, please, ladies," to examine it; and as she looked out, so quiet and unconcerned, on the people hurrying and bustling and shouting after lost luggage, she thought of the last time she had come to that station, no second-class passenger

with a well filled trunk and plenty of money in her purse, but a poor tramping woman, hungry, weary, wayworn; carrying all her worldly goods in a disreputable looking bundle, so disreputable looking that a common porter hesitated to consider it as guaranty for a night's lodging in one of the obscurest of Angusbury courts. She remembered the sullen despair with which, after the Millsmany train had slowly glided away, she paced up and down the platform, until, chancing to read that bit of newspaper in which some kind stranger had wrapped her a few biscuits, a new and unexpected turn had been given to her life. Before then, all was so dark and dreary and wretched. Hunger and misery had well-nigh worn out even the wish for revenge. That night she cared for nothing but death. Now, the

almost spent fire had burned up again; now the future lay clearly enough before her, that one black purpose, the cursing of Nils Brayton's life, well defined upon it. She knew what she had to do. She would do it, and then she could be content to die. Then indeed there would be nothing left but to die, and, as she said—finish it.

Mr. Tredegar went to Southampton with them. He might feel, but he was too proud to reveal it by word or sign. Only in his lingering, whispered—"God bless you, my child," Hester felt how much he had loved her. From the deck of the *Ruby* she watched him, until the old-remembered face grew dim, and the tall figure but as a faint speck on the pier. Then the dew began to fall—dew of evening, and dew of tears,

and she saw him no more. Next morning, looking out, she beheld only the deep murmuring sea. The old home and the old life were far off now. She would come back to them again no more for ever.

Slowly the weeks passed on of that monotonous sea life, so new to Hester, so strange and dream-like,—a life in which there seemed nothing to link her with the past or the future,—a life from which all the old landmarks appeared to have been swept away. Sights, sounds, faces were alike unfamiliar. She might have been in another world, but for Jane Fawcet.

Jane, quiet, humble, patient as ever; watching every movement, anticipating every want, stepping about so silently, speaking with low, hushed voice, that could scarcely be heard amidst that din of confused

noises—Jane seemed to be the only link which bound her to the past life. Looking into that white, still face, which had grown almost as familiar as Milcote itself, Hester felt herself taken back to the old home. Once more she sat in that dim little parlour, with its quaint, faded furniture. There were her father's books, his high-backed chair, with the table and lamp close by, as she had placed them ready for him many and many a day before May came home. Clearly as in dreams we sometimes see the faces of the dead, she watched him pacing that sunny walk by the apricot wall, pausing sometimes for ten minutes together, not to pluck the golden ripe fruit, or count the cluster roses that bloomed so rarely beside it; not to listen to the blackbirds chirping in the sycamore trees, or the

pleasant drowsy hum of bees murmuring over the flower-beds, but to catch some stray thought, or follow out some long reasoning process which was weaving itself in his busy brain. Jane's voice, too, hushed and low, took her back to the time, not so very far off yet, when she had listened to it in the gloom of that shadow which rested so heavily on Milcote—that shadow which had almost been the shadow of death. Just so quietly as she spoke now had she asked the oft-repeated question, "How is Miss May?" and Hester remembered the slow, dull pain, with which, day by day, she had answered it, when there seemed no hope that that shadow of death would pass away. Could it be that the autumn leaves had fallen but once since then? And those days seemed so far away, the days

when she watched by May's bedside, listening to her feeble, unconscious dreamings, while the August breeze stole in through darkened windows, and far off, as though in another world, she heard the merry song of the birds—a song for which her heart found no answer.

Waking from thoughts like these, she looked out, and saw the waves lapping at the vessel's side, and the pennons fluttering top-mast high; and, perhaps, far off in the distance, a white sail brightening in the sunshine. Then she remembered the present, and looked onward to the future, which seemed, indeed, a stranger dream than the past, and more unreal, because there was no familiar face or voice to bridge over the great gulf which lay between her and it.

So the weeks passed on, week after week,

week after week, marked by neither change nor excitement, weeks slow and sleepy as the waves which were bearing them on to that far-off shore. One by one the glorious southern constellations rose upon them in place of those which set to appear no more; then the golden splendours of a tropic sky, its gorgeous cloud-land, its midnight gemmed with stars, whose brightness dwellers in the cold north never even dream of; and instead of the long, sweet English twilights, in which day lingers ere it dies, night came with quick step, giving place as quickly to dawn again. Week after week, week after week, until, one fair Sabbath morning, a little bird fluttering down with weary wing told that the end was near. Then a faint purple mist dimming the horizon, then the welcome cry,—

"Land! land!"

"Land." And new life stirred amongst the dull, sleepy crew, and the passengers thronged on deck and eagerly examined through the captain's telescope that dim, purple stain, which was slowly growing into something like distinctness. And as they came nearer and nearer, some, who had made the voyage before, pointed out familiar headlands and mountain peaks to those who were outward-bound for the first time. And then the passengers began to gather up their luggage, and great were the outcries for missing portmanteaus or travelling chests which had travelled further than their owners intended. The ladies, too, who were expecting friends or relatives to meet them, turned over their wardrobes and consulted with each other as to the most suitable costumes

in which to make their first appearance; and as the vessel would soon be sighted from the land, every speck which came into view between it and the shore was eagerly watched, for it might be a boat putting out to meet them.

As this confusion and excitement increased, there came over Hester that sickening fear which sometimes follows in the track of hope. What if there should be no one to meet her? What if Nils Brayton should be ill, or far away, or dead, or, worse still, untrue? It was a needless fear, and she chided herself for letting it take any hold upon her, yet she could not shake it off. It came again and again, strengthening as they neared the shore, and one or two boats really had put out to meet them, and there had been heard shouts of greeting, and

tearful, trembling welcomes from those who met after long, long years of dreary parting.

Was there, then, no welcome for her? Jane Fawcet leaned over the bulwarks with white rigid face, straining her eyes towards each dim speck on the rippling waters. And her brow darkened as that speck disappeared, or, nearing until they could distinguish it to be a boat, revealed other than the familiar form for which she was looking so eagerly. If he should not come, then, after all! Jane Fawcet ground her teeth in anger; not for Nils Brayton's want of truth, if he was indeed untrue, but that having risked so much she had failed again.

At last Hester could bear the suspense no longer. She went into the ladies' saloon, empty and deserted now, for every one was

on deck; and, lying down on one of the couches, tried to sleep. That might drive away the creeping fear, at any rate it would still it for a time.

She did fall asleep, and dreamed of the old life. She was again at Angusbury, tracking her way through its narrow winding streets to the School of Art. Little Mr. Bilson was there, trotting about as heretofore, drawing out easels, attending to the chalk squares and elementaries, stopping now and then for a few minutes' gossip with his favourite young ladies, then off again to fetch chalks, and give an eye to the outlines and perpendiculars. As the Abbey clock chimed the hour for class, Mr. Brooke came in, with just the bright, pleasant smile of old. He loitered amongst the antiques, and then came to her cur-

tained recess, chatting with her about her work, sometimes taking the brush out of her hand to alter the fall of a leaf, or the shading of a fern. Then everything changed. The old room, the mullioned windows, the Greek gods and goddesses, friezes, scrolls, and medallions melted away. She was in Milcote Lane, under the sycamore trees, through whose little young leaves the stars shone faintly. And a tall, gaunt woman was speaking to her, asking the way to Angusbury station—a dark-featured woman, with hollow eyes, and low, muttering voice, which had a sound of death in it. Then that melted away too, and all round and about her there was nothing but sea, grey, silent sea, over whose waves that woman's face kept rising and falling—rising and falling—pale as a coffined face, but ever looking so

steadfastly upon her out of those hollow eyes.

Hester put out her hand to bid the spectral thing away, and found it held fast. Then some one stooped down and kissed the eyelids still heavy with sleep and dreams.

It was Nils Brayton.

CHAPTER XVI.

AND with him came back the feeling of safety, the sense of rest, which seemed to overflow and calm every other thought. Not joy, not exultation, but rest—perfect rest. All would be well now, for where Nils Brayton came, there only could be peace. Oh! the beauty of that waking! Surely there could be but one other like it, —when the soul, after life's long feverish dream, should wake and find itself for ever at rest in heaven.

Jane Fawcet saw him come. Since that welcome cry of "Land! land!" she had

been leaning over the bulwarks, gazing towards that wavering purple line of shore, which by-and-by needed no telescope to shape it into distinctness. She had listened with sharp impatience to the greetings which were exchanged on board, as boat after boat neared the vessel's side. And she had seen, long before any other passenger caught sight of it, the little canoe in which a native rowed Nils Brayton from the shore. She met him meekly, humbly enough; humbly as ever she had met him with the old Milcote message,—

"Miss Tredegar is engaged, sir."

There was no need to give any such message now. They were welcome to any joy the meeting could give them. It would not be for long. And so, when, with a low curtsey, she had told him that her

mistress was resting in the cabin, she went back and leaned over the bulwarks again with a smile of triumph on her white face.

"It will be all right now," she said to herself, as she watched the little canoe glide away over the rippling waves. "The waiting was very long, but it is over at last."

It was well Nils Brayton came so soon, for had he not come then he might not have come at all. Towards evening a wind set in from land and drove the vessel out to sea again. It was to no purpose that the sailors swore and the impatient passengers chafed and fretted, as the *Ruby* drifted on before the breeze, until the haven, once so near, became again a dim stain upon the horizon. They must

just wait patiently for a change; as other people had waited patiently for other changes.

Jane Fawcet was the only one who never complained. The farther out to sea, the better for her. Quietly enough she listened to the muttered wrath of the sailors, and smiled as the passengers came on deck to inquire the way of the wind, or to scan with unconcealed impatience that purple line of shore which grew so very faint. After awhile she disappeared, and was presently seen coming out from the hold, but as the sailors supposed she had gone thither to look after some luggage for her mistress, no notice was taken of her.

Twilight, which comes so quickly there, began to fall. Nils Brayton came on deck. There was no one at that end of the

vessel; most of the passengers were below, preparing for landing whenever the wind should take a turn.

Everything was so quiet and so still; only a drifting cloud here and there upon the sky, which, as he watched it, deepened into the soft, velvety blue of night. So calm was his sky, but far more bright. Before him lay a sweet, new life, wherein the past, long ago forgiven, might also be forgotten. Thousands and thousands of miles lay between him and it. Nay, was it not parted from him by that infinite distance, farther than east from west, which a merciful God places between the pardoned sinner and his sin? It should no longer vex him now. The growth of pure and noble deeds should spread their living screen before it, hiding it from him with leaves

whose everlasting spring no autumn should have leave to blast. He had turned away from his wickedness, he should save his soul alive.

And then in Nils Brayton's heart, though his lips moved not, a true thanksgiving rose to the good God who had led him to rest at last.

A hand was laid upon his arm. Not Hester's gentle touch, which rested so lightly on it half an hour ago. The clasp of this hand was so hard and tight that he turned hastily round.

Was it, then, so far away, the memory of that guilt whose grave he thought to have looked upon no more for ever? Had she risen again, that fiery, passionate-hearted woman, whose love, too fiery and passionate, he had once thrown from him?

It might have been a vision that he turned and looked upon, the spectral fancy of a brain too busy with the past; only that a spectre never clutches with such desperate grasp as that which Jane Fawcet laid upon him now.

She had dressed herself in the things which she bought at Angusbury, not long before they set sail. Her black hair rippled in many a shining tress over the scarlet shawl that she wore with such a queenly sort of grace. On the hand, tolerably white and shapely now, which she laid upon his arm, there sparkled a richly chased gold ring. Night was falling fast, but light enough lingered still to reveal the little turquoise forget-me-not, which Nils Brayton remembered only too well. Those hollow eyes, that deeply lined forehead, those thin

colourless lips, belonged to the Milcote servant-girl; all the rest was Ginevra Fossanette, as he had parted from her eleven years ago in that far-away western island. Yet while he looked upon her, her cheeks began to flush, and something of the old fiery light glowed out from the hollow eyes.

"Yes," she said, with a cool audacious nod as he shrank back from her. "It is I. You need not look so scared. Jane Fawcet, or Ginevra Fossanette, whichever you choose to call me. I am not dead, you see, as you told me at the Monk's Crag I was; nothing of the sort. You remember that gipsy woman, don't you? And she told you that the dead could curse bitterly the living who were untrue to them. Ay, and they can too, and they will. You

cower," she said, laughing maliciously as she followed his trembling, backward steps. "You are afraid of the poor gipsy woman, so lonely, so far from home. And you may well fear, brave gentleman. You left me once, because I was too fiery for you; and I couldn't bear to be left, so I came to England after you. I wanted revenge; that was what I wanted."

She had it now, if that once proud head bending so low, and that once lofty, upward look quailing before hers, were enough. But Jane Fawcet wanted other revenge than that.

"Nils Brayton," she said, "I've lived a hard life in England. I have hungered and starved and shivered whilst you were warm and full. I have trodden many a weary mile through London streets, and you know

what it is for a woman to tread those streets alone, whilst you sat at your own fireside, with none to touch or harm you. I have crouched like a menial, and taken hard words, and curtsied to a proud master, whilst you sat at his table, as proud and stern as he. But I bore it all, because I knew I should find you at last. And I have found you. You cannot escape me now. It takes many waters, Nils Brayton, to quench hate."

As she spoke, the old passionate glow which had been bidden away from her face so long, came back to it. Her eyes shone with the light which dazzled him years ago, first dazzled and then repelled; for it told of an angry soul within, a nature that would be quick to resent, slow to forgive. But there was neither anger nor

passion in her voice. That was very low, and had a cold, mocking ring in its tones. Something in it forced him to listen, though every word was like a sword stroke.

"Yes, Nils Brayton; it takes many waters to quench hate. You spoiled my life for me long ago, and I said I would spoil yours for it. And I have spoiled it. Ah! how fair your bonny bride will look when the red flames are curling round her. What a glorious wedding we shall have, with the red flames for bridemaidens!"

He thought the woman was mad, and he would have taken hold of her to lead her away, if indeed the whole thing was not a dream; a sort of trance, that would vanish as suddenly and unexpectedly as it had come.

No, it was no dream. There she stood before him, a living flesh and blood creature; robbed, indeed, of the flashing beauty which had once beguiled him, but keeping still in mien and gesture the pride of the old time.

"No, you need not touch me," she said, as he came nearer to her. "I see you are afraid of me, brave gentleman, and I am so lonely, so far from home. But I have done now. I am not going to trouble you any more. Good-bye, and when the wedding bells ring, we will listen to them together; but not here, Nils Brayton—not here."

She set her foot upon the bulwarks and sprang lightly over the vessel's side. A splash, a gurgling sound, the gleam of a white arm upon the darkening waters, and

Ginevra Fossanette, the angry-hearted Creole beauty, the humble, patient servant-maid of Milcote, was seen again no more.

CHAPTER XVII.

"A WOMAN overboard!"

That cry brought the whole ship's company on deck. Captain, sailors, and passengers thronged to the bulwarks. Ropes were thrown out, the boat lowered, but to no purpose. She had drifted under the vessel, away down to the deep waters beneath, and lay there quietly enough; the work which she had waited so patiently for, done at last; well done, surely done. Even had she not sunk so soon, there would have been scant hope of rescue, for while she was yet speaking to Nils

Brayton, the rapid twilight had faded, and now the night only showed here and there a star, shining out through clouds which a swift wind was driving across the sky.

Yet the crew and the passengers lingered by the bulwarks. It seemed cruel to go back again to their work, their business, or their idle talk, whilst there was a single chance of saving the poor unfortunate creature, who,—so all but Nils Brayton thought,—had fallen overboard by accident. So near the haven, too, when the great wide sea had been crossed in safety, and all danger seemed overpast. It was pitiful, they said, very pitiful. And again they tried, fruitlessly as before, to save her.

In the hurry and confusion attendant upon this sudden alarm, no one noticed the

tiny wreaths of smoke which came curling up from the hold. Ginevra had laid her plans well, and done her work effectually. She had gone very quietly, and under pretence of searching for some lost luggage, had held a light to the piles of trunks and boxes which were crowded down below. And she had laid trains of wood and paper from one part to another, that the flames, when once they kindled, should spread surely and rapidly. She knew that the excitement caused by her falling overboard would bring all the people to that end of the vessel, and whilst they were gaping and wondering, and perhaps trying to save her, the fire would have time to work its way.

She was right. Unnoticed, the flames curled and wreathed down below; then

shot out in livid tongues, mingled with blinding, suffocating clouds of smoke, and sparks which the wind, heightened to a gale now, scattered over the deck, to kindle where they fell; and after smouldering for awhile, break into a blaze.

Then was heard that terrible cry, terrible anywhere, but never so terrible as when lifted up in the blackness of night, far out at sea, where to flee for escape is but to rush into another and equally fatal danger.

"Fire!"

And mingling with that cry rose the shrieks of women and children, children whose innocent little lives no mother's love could save from that dreadful death which every moment came nearer and nearer. And still those livid streaks of flame kept leap-

ing forth, curling from mast to mast, along the rigging, up the yards, until, like a fiery standard, they fluttered side by side with the *Ruby's* own topmast colours. Death's pennon, which, alas! would strike for no enemy that might strive against it.

No help, no hope! Far out at sea, with never a friendly vessel near to pick up the poor, shivering creatures, who, choosing the hungry waves rather than the hungrier flames, had leaped overboard, and clinging to charred fragments of the ship's timbers, were striving to keep the dear life a little longer. And still upon the gloom and blackness of the night, the glow of the burning vessel grew brighter and more lurid as the tall masts and timbers, now one mass of flame, were reflected in the waves beneath.

And Jane Fawcet, who had done it all, slept on so quietly beneath those tossing waves. Slept on through fire and storm; slept on through many a bitter shriek and dying groan; slept on whilst one after another of those she had destroyed sunk slowly down and lay side by side with her in that ocean grave.

Nils Brayton lashed Hester to a spar, and then, clinging to it himself, they both floated out into the open sea. It was their only chance. They might drift shorewards with the tide; if not, they would die together. Happier so, far happier so than for either of them to live on alone, whose only home was in each other's love.

They heard the terrible wail of drowning men, the piercing screams of women and children, loth to leave the burning ship, yet

tortured by its flames; the low cry of despair from helpless wretches, who, like themselves, were clinging to broken spars, bruised by waves which, rising and falling, dashed them against the vessel's side. Now and again, as some blazing timber fell with a mighty crash into the sea, its light revealed to them the pale upturned faces of the dying and the dead; faces distorted with pain and terror, or hushed into the eternal calm which neither of these could ever break again. More than once Nils Brayton reached and caught some woman's outstretched hand, and held her safely for awhile, but too soon the heavy waves parted them, and with a wild cry she was drifted away again, down, down into the deep sea.

Then the wind changed, and floated them towards the shore. They could tell they

were nearing it by the harbour lights which shone faintly through the gloom. If those poor bruised hands could hold on a little longer, and those weary heads be held above water, all would yet be well. They would drift on to the shingle by and by, the wind was bearing them to it now; and then some of the people on shore, who might have seen the distant glow of the burning ship, would be kind to them, would lead them to a place of shelter and safety. If only they could hold on a little longer.

"Hester."

She heard his voice amidst the restless murmur of the waves. She stretched out her hand, feeling for his through the gloom, and held it fast. She was safe, then; they might win to land yet.

"Courage, Hester, I see the harbour lights not far away."

Then her hand clasped his again, and he heard her voice, low, but clear and steady,

"Yes, Nils, there is hope. We are in the haven now."

Just then a heavy wave broke upon them, and dashed Nils Brayton's head violently against the spar. Thank God! it had not broken upon her, for he could feel the clasp of her fingers still over his own. But he knew no more after that; the blow had stunned him into insensibility.

When he opened his eyes again, he was lying on some slippery shingle, close to a group of seaweed-covered rocks, round which the surf lapped and curled with a cool, faint murmur, that seemed like a lullaby. All was very calm and still. No fierce

wind drifted the clouds before it any more, or beat the sea into white foam. No bitter wail or dying cry was heard, no angry waves reflected the flames' red glow. Smoothly those waves rippled on now under the morning twilight—smoothly and playfully, as though no gallant vessel had gone down beneath them—as though they covered no maimed and mangled dead. That terrible night's work might have been only a feverish dream from which he was slowly dawning to consciousness, but for the charred and blackened timber beside him, which was no dream, which told too truly its own tale of bygone danger and distress.

Dimly at first, and afterwards with vivid distinctness, Nils Brayton remembered all that had happened; the sweet meeting with Hester; the quiet hour on the bulwarks,

marred so suddenly by Ginevra's appearance; her half-mad words; her fatal leap; the burning vessel; the shrieks and groans of drowning or burning passengers; the noise and tumult of the waves; the helpless drifting to and fro beneath the starless sky, hoping against hope that the returning tide might float them to rest at last—to rest and precious life again. And Hester's low-spoken words of comfort:

"There is hope. We are in the haven now."

Yes; they had reached it. Fire and storm were over, all might yet be well. But there was no clasp upon his fingers now.

Stretching them feebly forth, he felt only the loose, slippery shingle, and the blackened

timber which had borne Hester and himself to land. Only these—nothing more than these. Guiding himself by the timber, he crawled nearer to the rocks, round which the waves still kept playing with such slumbrous, peaceful lullaby, a cradle song for the dead who slept so quietly beneath them.

Stiffened, benumbed, scarcely yet aroused from the long swoon into which that sudden blow had cast him, it was with difficulty that Nils Brayton dragged himself along, clinging to the rough sides of the spar. At last he gained the rocks, and crept over them to where the waves broke in many a curl of shining spray upon tangled seaweed and rosy-tinted shells.

Was that a woman's hair, long light hair, which swayed so brightly upon the

heaving water? Was that a woman's hand outstretched upon the slippery weed? Was that a woman's face, calm, but so white and dead, upturned in the grey dawn-light.

With an exceeding bitter cry, Nils Brayton laid his own beside it. Would God the whiteness of death had been upon them both.

"Oh! Hester, Hester, if I might have died too!"

No; that poor, sea-drenched form is not the woman he loved so faithfully. Those words of hers were very true. Safe for evermore, sheltered by a love deeper even than his, from all toil, and weariness, and change, Sister Hettie was in the haven now.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BUT for him? Ah! there was no haven of rest yet for him, to whom long past folly had wrought its terrible, though tardy retribution.

Sitting there in the grey dawn light, by Hester's lifeless form; before him the unconscious sea, over whose calm breast not a ripple of regret broke for the hope it had so cruelly taken; behind him the land of strangers, whose shores, unpressed by her foot, could never now be home to him, only exile—Nils Brayton learned the great truth, that no time nor distance, no re-

pentance even, nor screen of noble endeavours and kindly deeds, can separate the sinner from his sin. God's sweet forgiveness may cleanse the soul, but He does not, in this world, destroy the evil seed which it has cast forth. That will grow, it will ripen. It will still bring forth its bitter fruit, even until death.

But only until death. For, as the slave's fetters drop from him the moment he treads on British ground, so the shadow of sin departs when heaven's shore is reached, and the soul, all clean and white, gains that new life from which the former things are passed away. The deepest grief that a forgiven soul can know is only until death.

They buried Hester under a palm-tree, by the ocean-shore; and in her grave Nils

Brayton left all that the world held for him of happiness or joy. Lonely, companionless, with no such bright hopes as came with him when he left it, he returned to his station up the country, returned to daily labour and to daily care; returned to live a life whose hours should be counted no more by joys or hopes, but only by the simple doing of duty. He had wasted a life. His own was wasted for it. Should he, therefore, greatly complain?

No one ever knew the story of that night's work. The few sailors and passengers, who, clinging, like Nils Brayton, to broken pieces of the ship's timbers, were drifted at last to land, thought, as, indeed, was only natural to think, that the fire had broken out accidentally, and that a brisk wind

had conveyed it to different parts of the vessel, so making useless all their efforts to subdue it. There had been no carelessness on the part of the passengers. All the regulations were strictly observed. The catastrophe was plainly accidental.

That was the account which was sent over to England, published there, and read with many tears and lamentations, by those who had friends or relatives on board the *Ruby*. Those were the tidings which people received who had come down from their different stations to meet the vessel. Hearing them, they returned sadly home, comforting themselves as best they could with the thought that there are things over which human will has no control. This was one of those sudden strokes of Providence, for which no one is to blame, over

which the most that can be done is to mourn in silence.

What need to tell them all the cruel truth? What need to add to their grief the bitterer grief of knowing that a human hand had wrought it, and wrought it knowingly, too? So Nils Brayton, who alone could have told that truth, spoke no word. He had suffered as deeply as any of those who, with such tearful eyes, listened to the sad story; far more deeply than those whom Jane Fawcet's pitiless revenge had hurried to their grave in the deep sea. For they rested quietly now, but there was no rest for him.

So he went back to that station far up the country; no more to walk amongst his fellows, though, with lofty mien and proud, fearless glance. Such were not for him

who had caused such deep sorrow, who had now wasted more lives than one. People never called Nils Brayton proud again. They never turned back to watch his lordly look, to mark how grand and upright he was. Jane Fawcet had said truly enough she could pull down that pride of his, she could bow him with shame and grief until none should know him for the same Nils Brayton who had once gone in and out so loftily among them. And she had done it now.

Yet his life was not all wasted, though she had spoiled it so bitterly. True, the sunlight never came back to him any more. No other hand was reached out to clasp his as Hester's had once clasped it. The headstone over that grave beneath the palm-tree, told where all his joy lay buried, too.

But he filled his life with good endeavour and fruitful toil. Nay, as some men look at success, it was even a successful life, for he won great honours in his country's service, a fair name in the list of her worthies. Only that which makes life truly precious had gone from him for ever; the glory and the beauty of living were alike past. All his toils, all his endeavours, however others might praise them, were but the patient filling up of time, until God should be merciful and take him where the shadow of his folly should fall upon him no more.

At last came content. Slowly, when the bitterness of death was passed, there came to him that truth which lays its cool hand on many a wounded heart. He learned that this life, if it be full of care and

weariness, is but a fragment of that great eternity through which the All Father wills His own children to be purely happy; that from all mistake, all error, all folly, and even sin, the soul may win upward to a better life; that grief and sorrow, rightly borne, do lift us up to Him who became perfect through suffering; and that only through the baptism of tears can any pass into right noble angelhood. Learning that, he waited until heaven should give him all that earth had taken away.

CHAPTER XIX.

YOU may come back again if you will, after years have passed away, to that pleasant old home at Milcote; the home where Hester Tredegar lived through the brightest joy and the deepest gloom of her little life.

Those tall sycamores in the lane stand erect as ever. The years which bring grey hairs, and tottering steps, and failing health, —the years which lead little children into blooming maidenhood or bright-eyed youth, which take the roses from the beauty's cheek, and rob the strong man of his

strength, have left them untouched. Still, in spring-time their leaves push forth, green and fresh; still the April wind, sweeping over them, scatters their wealth of blossom on the daisied meadows beneath. Still in summer evenings the blackbird sings his merriest note amongst their clustering boughs, and the robin answers from the thorn-hedge below, with a gush of sweet, saucy music.

The Milcote Lane sycamore trees stand yet like giants, firm and strong, whilst he who used to tread beneath them erect as they, now walks alone, a thoughtful, silent man, under India's scorching sun.

Milcote is little changed without. The old garden looks as pleasant as ever. The lichens have neither grown nor faded on that old stone wall, which separates it from the meadows beyond. The jasmine tree, some-

what withered now about the roots, for it has not been judiciously cut and pruned, clambers over the porch, and puts forth, summer by summer, constellations of starry blossoms, as fragrant as those whose memories once stayed Jane Fawcet's lifted hand, and sent her cowering back into the shelter of the lilac bushes. And if, in September time, you stood by the open kitchen door, you might see the dead leaves drift hither and thither over that same little grassed yard, which used to be such a famous play place for them, when she, thinking her dark thoughts, weaving her dark purposes, stood with folded arms and watched them.

If the weather is very bright and sunny, you may see, as you lean over the low gate, a tall, bent old man, whose grey hair

flutters in the wind as he walks very slowly up and down the path by the apricot wall. He is too old to study much now. Those poor dim eyes can no longer guide the trembling hands to construct projections and plans. People speak of him as "Mr. Tredegar, poor man!" and anticipate his "dropping off" as an event which cannot be far distant now. He keeps a little of his old sternness, though, even yet. He will not let his lip quiver, nor his eyes overflow when May, who has quite got over the sudden shock which the news of the *Ruby's* terrible fate caused her, talks of "poor, dear sister Hettie!" Ah! he never knew how much he loved that quiet daughter of his, until it was too late.

Within, the place is more changed, though still you may go into that little

bed-room, with its white-curtained bed, in which May tossed and murmured through those long weeks of fever, and find it just the same. Mr. Tredegar will not have any alteration made in that room, so you can look at the old familiar pictures, and turn over the pages of the books which Hester used to read to her sister, and sit in the cushioned chair by the window, watching the leaves flutter down, one by one—one by one—from the elm-tree at the corner of the house. You may go a story higher, too, into Jane Fawcet's room—Jane Fawcet, whose bones are lying amongst shells and sea-weed at the bottom of the Indian Ocean—and stand at the latticed casement, from which she so often looked out into the dark night, weaving plans as dark, and far more baleful. The small

looking-glass, which once reflected her hollow cheeks and sunken eyes, has its old accustomed place on the deal dressing-table, with a smart cap hanging over it, very different to Jane's close, servant-like head-gear; and a sixpenny imitation lace collar, which the present Milcote housemaid will put on when she comes upstairs to "clean herself" before dinner.

There is no thinking of any very dark thoughts in that room, now; no knitting of brows over miniature portraits or turquoise rings; no working out of revengeful schemes, whilst the rest of the good Milcote people lie quietly in their beds. The brain that works under that smart housemaid's cap is an ordinary, commonplace brain; one that will never weave any momentous schemes, either for good or evil;

one that has no fatal memories to vex it, no anxious thought, except how ten pounds a year can be made to cover needful expenses, and leave a little over for artificial flowers and a new bonnet at Whitsuntide, when the Angusbury fair is held. And yet, as places do take the character of people who have lived in them, as evil thoughts and cruel purposes seem to stain even the unconscious walls within whose shadow they were conceived, so you cannot go into that chamber and tread the floor that once echoed to Jane Fawcet's foot-step, and lean your arms on the window seat where she used to lean hers, and look round on the familiar objects which in years gone by met her eyes when she came up there, weary and worn from her household work, without an uncomfortable

shudder, a creeping sense of some evil presence which has taken up its abode there and will go no more out.

But it is when you descend to what used to be the Milcote parlour, now the dining-room, that you find what a change has come over the spirit of the place. For, except Mr. Tredegar's book-case and his tall, straight-backed chair—the proud old man will not condescend to an easy chair yet—there is nothing to identify this room with that where Sister Hettie used to listen to Basil Brooke's graceful speeches, where little May used to dance about and make paper flowers, where Miss Lapiter—dead now, poor little lady—used to wind through those interminable paragraphs of hers. Formerly there was an air of severe, rigid comfort about it, a military contempt of "luxury

and useless lumber," as Mr. Tredegar called sofas, cushions, and china vases. Now, a single glance tells you that someone has sway there to whom the three questions, "What shall we eat, what shall we drink, and wherewithal shall we be clothed?" are of vital importance. The room seems to be "all pantry." You might think that Crosse and Blackwell, purveyors to the Queen, had the furnishing of that handsome side-board under their own special care, so richly is it supplied with sauces, pickles, condiments, flavouring compounds, and relishes, which must surely make the art of dining a most luxurious and elaborate affair. As for the pictures on the walls—and there are some very fine ones too—they harmonise artistically with the sideboard, having for the most part a "view to eating," as Miss

Lapiter would say. One is a fruit-piece, grapes, pine-apples, oranges and lemons, ranged round a crystal goblet, over whose brim the red wine is sparkling; the whole disposed upon a piece of matting, which you could almost take up and carry away with you, so wonderfully does it stand out from the canvas. Another is a black boy, with scarlet lips and shining white teeth, holding out to you a cut melon, whose rich juicy pulp on a hot summer's day must look most vexatiously natural. Then comes a splendid eastern slave, resting her dark cheek on a cluster of pomegranate. Then another fruit-piece. Then a brace of dead grouse, hung in a position most uncomfortable for themselves, poor things, if they could be annoyed by it, but well adapted to show the rich metallic glow of

the feathers on their necks; and the artist has "depicted, with marvellous fidelity," as the critics say, a drop or two of gore, trickling over the golden brown plumage, and staining a panel of deal board, also depicted with marvellous fidelity, on which they are hung. Not exactly a pleasant picture, though very suggestive of corporation banquets.

The heavy crimson curtains and soft carpet hold the remains of last night's cigar smoke, which greets you as you enter, like the dim memory of joys departed, combined with the fragrance of a very recent dinner —so recent that its influence lingers yet in the form of a bland smile on the face of that portly gentleman, we will not wound his sensibilities by calling him stout, who sits at the table, holding a glass of old

crusted port between his eyes and the window; watching its ruby glow with the leisurely air of a connoisseur in that sort of thing. Then he lowers it to his lips, and takes a long, luxurious sip. Ah! no nectar given by Hebe to the gods could be more delicious than that sip of old crusted port, judging from the sigh of ample, full-rounded content which follows the setting down of the glass. Evidently this gentleman knows how to enjoy life; he finds it a "satisfying portion," especially the dining-room department of it.

There are some faces, and most people who have looked carefully at faces, for even a very few years, will be able to recall one or more, over which, between early manhood and middle-age, there creeps an earthly, carnalised expression, a look of lazy, low content and

self-complacency. And this without in any measure deteriorating from what is generally called a prepossessing gentlemanly appearance. You remember such a face five or ten years ago. There was a controlled, truth-seeking, self-denying expression about it then, the index of a character that would search for and follow the right, that would even suffer for it, if need were, that would think and reflect and look upward. You see it now, and though every feature is the same, an entirely different soul looks through them, a soul that is saying to itself, "Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." A soul that knows no self-denial, no thought of any other life than this; a soul that will never be capable of lofty sorrow, that will never feel any divine discontent at the earthliness of its surroundings. There are few things

sadder than to see a face so changed; to think of all that it might have been, and then to look upon what it is.

Most probably you will not recognise this stout gentleman, who is sipping his port with such an air of leisurely content, and so you may as well be re-introduced to him as Basil Brooke, Esq., late of Kensington; also late of the School of Art, but now the most successful and popular portrait-painter in Angusbury. Mr. Brooke's elegant studio at Milcote is lined with half-finished "subjects," of all ages, from plump nursery beauties in sashes and pinafores, to broad old dowagers in black velvet and family diamonds, and exhibiting every variety of that "expression," which, as a true artist says, is the supreme beauty, so far beyond the evanescent charm of features or com-

plexion. Next to the art of improving plain people, Mr. Brooke excels in drapery. He can paint white satin so as no other painter in England can paint it, so natural that you feel as if you must lay your hand upon it to feel its exceeding richness and softness. And he has also acquired a great reputation in pearls and Honiton lace. His portrait of the present mayoress of Angusbury, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy, was greatly praised by the leading critical journals, on account of its Honition lace and pearls. "This artist's draperies are faultless," so they said, and no one who sees the mayoress's portrait hung up in the state-room of the Mansion House at Angusbury, will question the correctness of the opinion.

The lady who sits at the top of the table, resting three chins and a half upon a

very white, fat little hand, is May Tredegar. Her fluttering days have come to an end, as Miss Lapiter prophesied would be the case. She has quite lost that canary bird grace and elegance and shyness which first won her husband's affections. To see her in her dressing-room now, vainly endeavouring to make a yard of belt ribbon meet round her waist, or to clasp six inches of bracelet over the arms that used to be so delicate and slender, you would be tempted to doubt her identity with the airy, fairy, mischievous little sprite who once used to carol from morning to night through those old rooms. But Mrs. Basil Brooke enjoys life very much. She is good-tempered and exceedingly amiable. Though she can no longer sit to her husband for a Hebe, or a Flora, or anything of that sort, she manages to set an excel-

lent dinner before him every day, which is more than Miss Lapiter at one time expected from her. Indeed, having found that a good dinner is an unfailing sedative to her husband's temper, which is not so equable as her own, she, like a dutiful wife, bends her whole mind to the daily "exhibition of the remedy;" so that perhaps she may be truthfully characterised, like the dining-room in which she sits, as all pantry. Certainly she is not all intellect.

Of course it was a great blow to Mrs. Basil when the tidings of that terrible catastrophe off Amherst reached England. Even now, her soft, cooing voice takes the slightest possible tremble as she speaks of "poor, dear Sister Hettie, who was lost, you know, in going out to India; such a sad thing, was it not?" But over a

woman whose heart is filled with complacency for her husband and her home, any sorrow which leaves these untouched, passes very lightly.

After a few sobs and tears, a few fond recollections and unavailing regrets, even that tragedy sank below the surface, leaving May's life smooth and unruffled as that far-off sea which ebbed and flowed over the buried vessel and its precious freight of souls. It is a fine art, that of forgetting, and May is skilful in it. Had Hester's memory no more abiding home than her sister's love could give, it had long ago passed away.

So much for Milcote. Better such a life as Nils Brayton spends in rough toil and honest endeavour; a life which knows no joy but far-off hope, no content but pre-

sent duty, than such a life as Basil Brooke and his wife live amongst fruit-pieces and game-pieces and crusted port and French condiments, in that luxuriously appointed home of theirs. Better a life which has lost its sunshine, than one out of which the soul has been quenched, that the senses may feed and fatten. There is hope in the deepest gloom, while yet we stretch forth patient hands, waiting and praying for the morning; but that is the saddest night of all in which we know no dark, nor pray for any dawn to arise upon us. For death brings sweet life to the soul that has suffered and been strong, but what can even death itself bring to the soul that has never truly lived?

THE END.

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